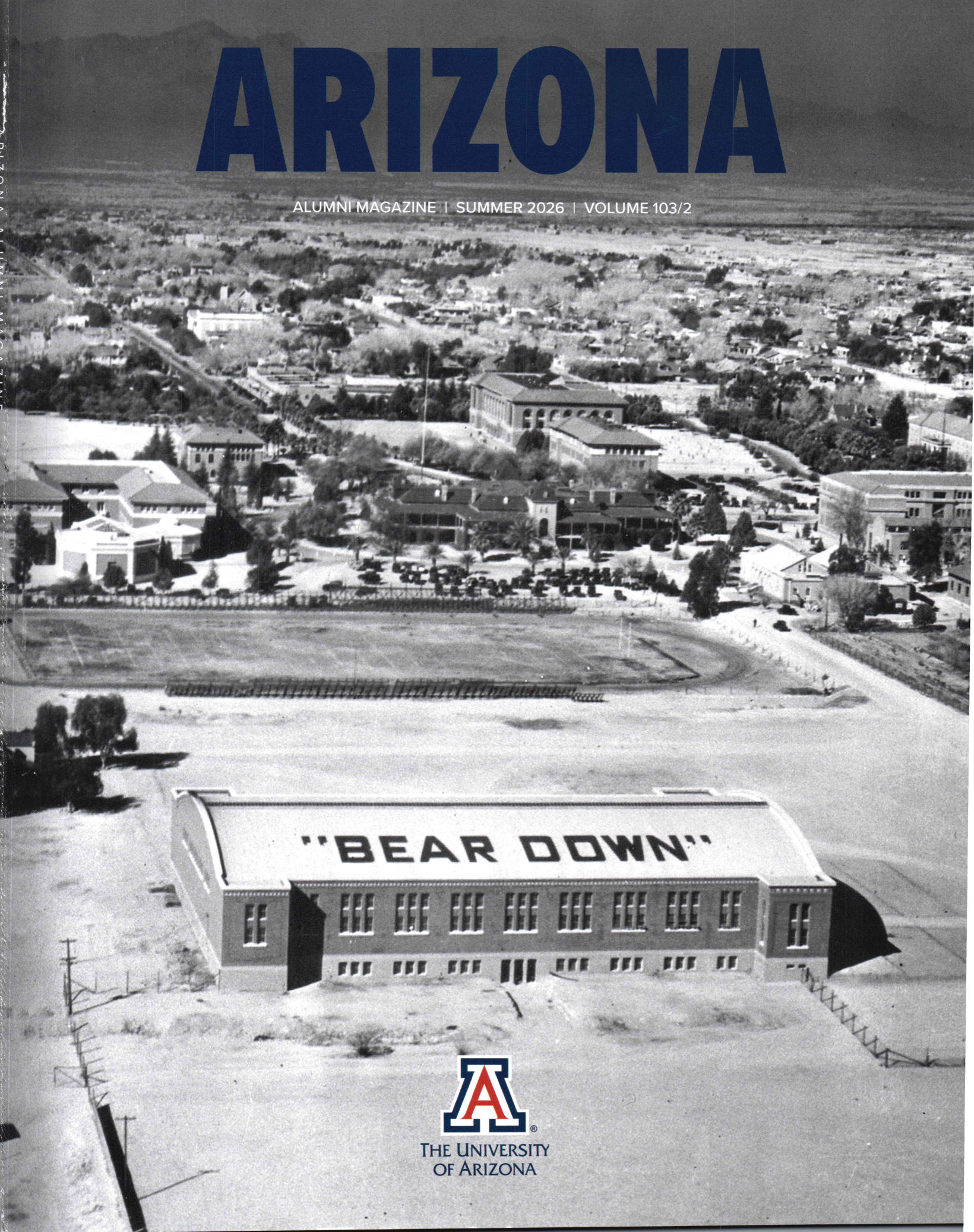
ARIZONA

ALUMNI MAGAZINE | SUMMER 2026 | VOLUME 103/2



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

THIS PAGE

A record-breaking winning streak to start (with the streak-breaker over ASU, no less). Florida, then UCLA, then UConn. Taking down the same Houston that took us down a year ago — three times. Jaden Bradley's fadeaway buzzer-beater in the Big 12 semifinal over Iowa State. Jaden Bradley, Big 12 Player of the Year. Tobe Awaka, Big 12 Sixth Man of the Year. Tommy Lloyd, Big 12 and Naismith Coach of the Year. Even if you'd stopped before Indianapolis, it would've been enough. Thanks to all the players and coaches, the community of support staff, and the fans for such an incredible season. Rest up, and Bear Down.

Photo: Mike Christy

ARIZONA
ALUMNI MAGAZINE

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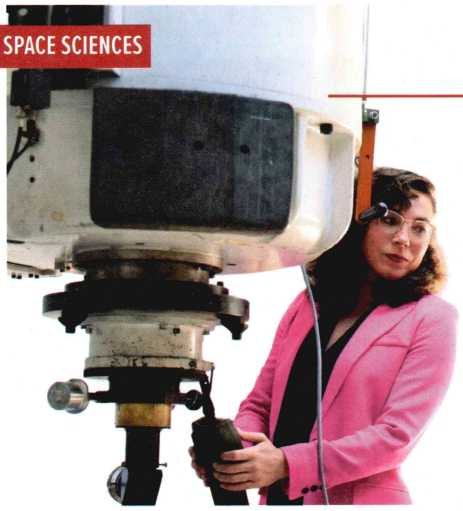
COVER
Bear Down Gym, Feb. 14, 1929, 9:55 a.m.
Photo: Courtesy Arizona Daily Star



SPACE SCIENCES

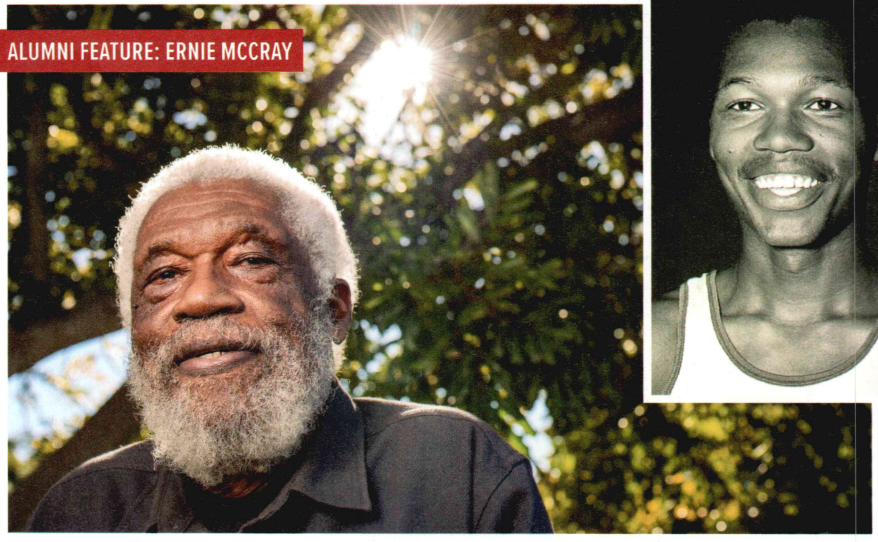
18

The U of A has been making history in astronomy and the space sciences since the establishment of the Steward Observatory more than a hundred years ago. Now, through ambitious projects like NASA's Pandora mission and social-media-friendly outreach of professors like astrophysicist and 2026 Guggenheim Fellow **Erika Hamden,** one of the school's great academic traditions continues.

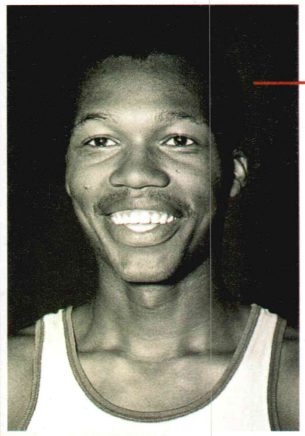
CAPLA FOR ARIZONA AND COMMUNITY

26

When it comes to outreach and impact, the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture (CAPLA) is doing extraordinary work. Two stories show just how far beyond campus these efforts go: one on CAPLA professor and extreme heat researcher **Ladd Keith '03 '05 '19**, and one on the collaborative work of **CAPLA students**; CAPLA's research and outreach wing, the Drachman Institute; and local nonprofits in designing and implementing a micro shelter village for Tucson-area homeless people.



ALUMNI FEATURE: ERNIE MCCRAY



36

Poet, educator and Wildcat basketball legend **Ernie McCray '60 '62** has lived on planet Earth for nearly 90 years. He doesn't move like he used to — these days he gets sore just playing the bongos. But he's still listening, still learning, still working for justice and arguing with his dog ("an órale kind of dude"), and still finding the bright side in a sometimes very dark world.

ARIZONA
ALUMNI MAGAZINE

DEPARTMENTS

4 Leadership

6 News Bits

10 Subject/Object

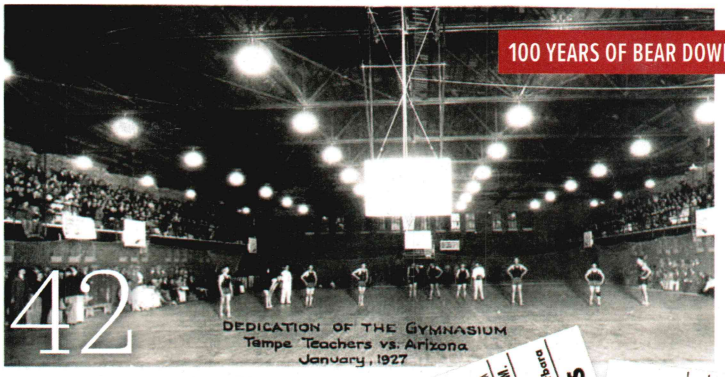
12 Campus Gem

14 In the Arts

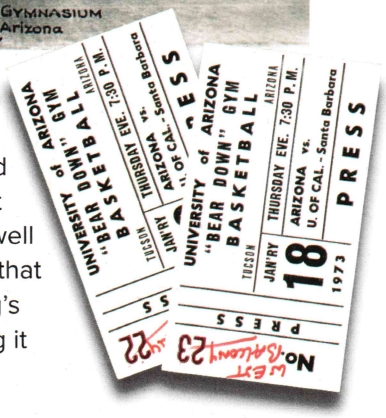
56 Class Notes

64 Wildcat Journey

68 Rearview



Bear Down Gym has gone through more than a few transformations since it opened its doors a hundred years ago. Here, learn a little about the gym's architectural history, as well as the 2013 adaptive reuse efforts that have restored some of the building's 1920s character while also bringing it meaningfully into the present.



Arizona Athletics delivers a historic year.

46

In her freshman acting class at the School of Theatre, Film & Television, **Vinessa Vidotto '18** wrote and performed a monologue in which she said that she wanted to start a scholarship within five years — a tall order for a college freshman, and one Vidotto, a working TV actress who grew up in a house where art wasn't considered a career option, fulfilled. Here, she looks back on how she got to where she is and why giving back to current students feels like an essential step.

ALUMNI FEATURE: VINESSA VIDOTTO

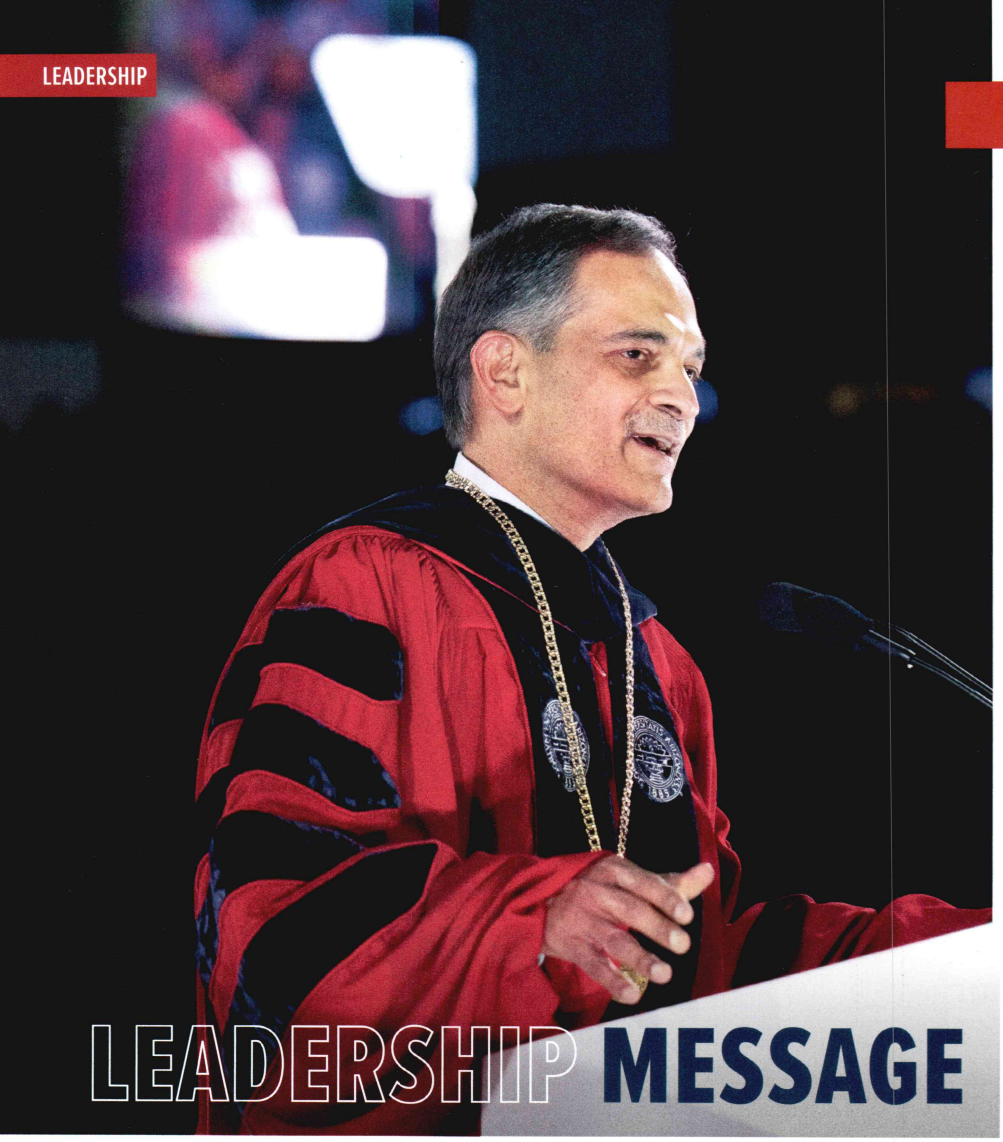


PHOTO: **CHRIS RICHARDS**

LEADERSHIP MESSAGE

Dear Wildcats,

In 1926, student body president and football quarterback John Byrd "Button" Salmon gave our university its most enduring tradition. His final words to his teammates — "Tell the team to bear down" — established a rallying cry that has guided generations of Wildcats for a century. We recognize it as more than a historical anecdote; it is a fundamental expression of the fortitude and resilience that define our campus community today.

This year, we are honoring the Bear Down centennial by celebrating signature university achievements of the past hundred years, all foundational to a legacy that continues today. After leading the Wildcats to our first Final Four in 25 years, Tommy Lloyd brought us together with a postgame tribute to Lute Olson. The roots of our space sciences program (see Page 18 of this issue) go back to 1963, when Gerard P. Kuiper and the Lunar and Planetary Lab mapped the surface of the moon for NASA missions. And the university has led in environmental research ever since the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research was founded in 1937 (you'll find recent work on arid lands and heat resilience on Page 26).

I am proud to share that University of Arizona programs and faculty continue to attract national recognition, setting the stage for our next hundred years of impact. Fifty graduate programs were ranked among the nation's best by U.S. News & World Report, including eight in the top 20. The School of Theatre, Film & Television has been named in Variety's 2026 Education Impact Report, marking the school's debut in the publication's annual list of top film and entertainment programs across the United States and Canada. The university advanced seven spots in the Blue Ridge Institute for Medical Research rankings. Playwright and Professor Elaine Romero and Associate Professor of Astrophysics Erika Hamden (see Page 24) were both named Guggenheim Fellows this spring. Finally, 12 of the state's 20 Flinn Scholars have chosen to begin their Wildcat journeys this fall in the W.A. Franke Honors College.

Excellence like this is evidence of the perseverance and hard work that defines Wildcats and our Bear Down ethos. Coupled with our heritage as a land-grant institution, it also translates to meaningful impact on Arizona's economy, health and quality of life. One final example: Tech Launch Arizona, our office for commercialization and innovation, generated $456 million in economic output and supported 3,700 jobs statewide in 2025. That's something to be proud of and another reason to greet fellow alumni with "Bear Down!"

Go 'Cats,

Suresh Garimella
President

WHEN IT CAN'T BE DONE, WE CAN'T BE STOPPED.

For 100 years, "Bear Down!" has echoed across the University of Arizona. And its meaning has been forged through game-changing discoveries, unforgettable victories, and moments of doing the impossible that reshaped the world as we know it. From developing maps to help NASA reach the moon, to knocking off three No. 1 seeds, Bear Down is how Wildcats push forward and redefine what's possible.

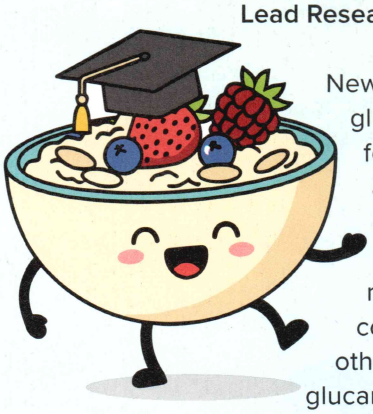
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

100 YEARS OF BEAR DOWN

NEWS BITS

STORIES BY: **RILEY BECK**

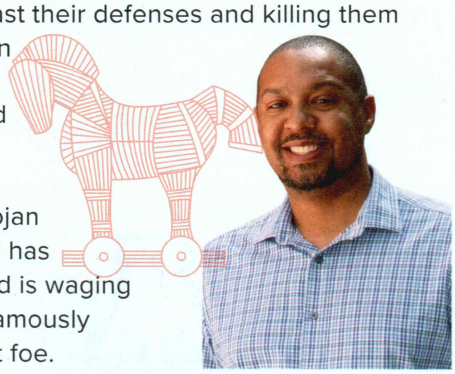
College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences
Lead Researcher: Frank Duca, Ph.D.



New research suggests beta-glucan — a soluble fiber found in foods like oats and barley — may support weight management by influencing the gut microbiome. When compared with several other dietary fibers, beta-glucan was uniquely linked to reductions in body weight and body fat, along with improved blood sugar regulation. (User note: Beer contains very little dietary fiber.)

University of Arizona College of Medicine – Tucson
Lead Researcher: Michael D. L. Johnson, Ph.D.

Researchers have tricked the potentially deadly bacterium MRSA into consuming toxic copper disguised as iron, a nutrient it needs to grow. The compound mimics molecules bacteria normally import, slipping past their defenses and killing them from within — even inside protective biofilms that shield infections from antibiotics. This inventive "Trojan Horse" compound has been patented and is waging war against its infamously antibiotic-resistant foe.

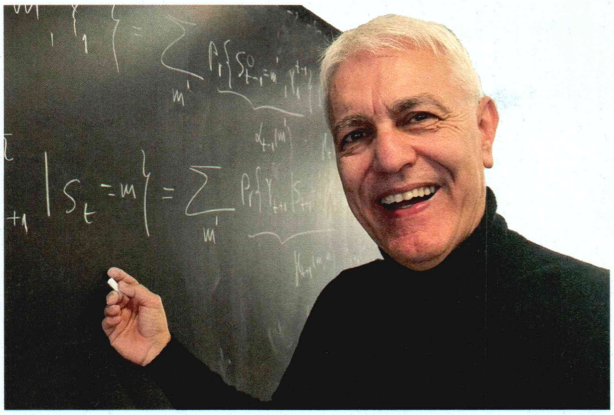


College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences
Lead Researcher: Alonso Favela, Ph.D.

Researchers are reintroducing traits from teosinte, corn's wild ancestor, into modern maize lines. These ancestral characteristics reshape the soil surrounding the crop's roots (known as the rhizosphere microbiome), altering microbial communities that influence nutrient cycling. This "rewilding" improves nitrogen retention and fertilizer efficiency, potentially making maize more sustainable while reducing nutrient loss and maintaining yields — a productive family reunion.

College of Engineering
Lead Researcher: Philipp Gutruf, Ph.D.

Frailty is a clinically diagnosable condition that affects 15% of U.S. residents aged 65 and older — and now, researchers have developed an AI-powered wearable that helps detect early signs of it. The lightweight device is worn on the thigh and continuously monitors leg motion and gait patterns. It improves preventive care and reduces fall risk, leading to fewer injuries and hospitalizations. Watch your step (or let the device watch it for you).

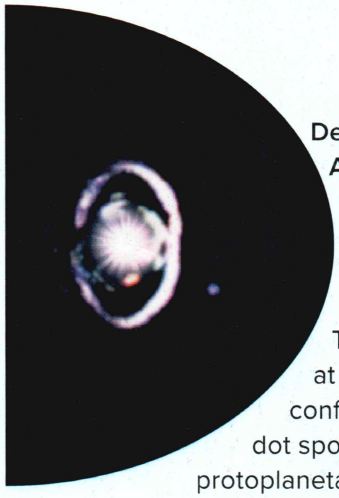


College of Engineering
Lead Researcher: Bane Vasić, Ph.D.

A renewed $125 million U.S. Department of Energy grant to Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory's Superconducting Quantum Materials and Systems Center supports research to advance quantum computing. Researchers are developing quantum low-density parity check codes and decoding methods that reduce errors in fragile qubits, making quantum systems more efficient and potentially enabling scalable, fault-tolerant quantum computers — an achievement that could lead to breakthroughs in medicine, cybersecurity and beyond. For the rest of us: Imagine if your laptop could finish a major software update in seconds instead of hours.

College of Science and Biosphere 2
Lead Researcher: Diane Thompson, Ph.D.

As though Biosphere 2 needed to be more compelling, scientists are now growing coral in its ocean habitat. They're part of temperature-resilience experiments — conducted in an enclosed ecosystem recognized by coral scientists worldwide as ideal for controlled studies — that will help us understand not just how climate change affects these invertebrates that are integral to so many marine ecosystems, but also what to do about it.



Department of Astronomy and Steward Observatory
Lead Researcher: Laird Close, Ph.D.

Technology developed at the U of A has helped confirm that a faint red dot spotted in a young star's protoplanetary disk is actually a gas giant planet in the process of forming. In a system known to host multiple planets within the same disk, this planet — now named WISPIT 2c — offers a rare, direct glimpse of active planet formation within a developing planetary system.

College of Veterinary Medicine
Lead Researcher: Evan MacLean, Ph.D.

Despite having shorter lifespans than small dogs, large dogs do not show faster cognitive decline, suggesting that lifespan and brain aging may be governed by different processes. To explore this, researchers are launching the SIGNAL study, which will track IGF-1 hormone levels and cognition in about 75 dogs over two years, aiming to improve understanding of aging and dementia in both dogs and, eventually, their human benefactors.

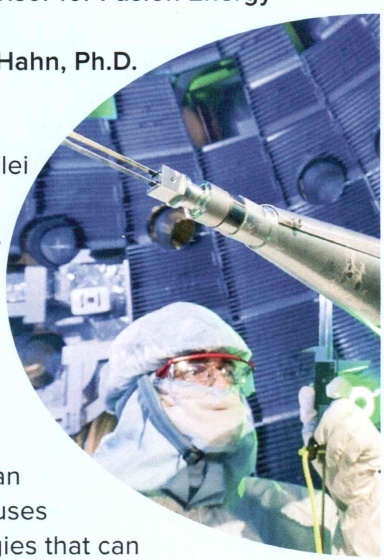
Original reporting by the University of Arizona Office of Communications
Photos: the University of Arizona

Visit **news.arizona.edu** for more stories.

R. Ken Coit College of Pharmacy
Lead Researcher: Bonnie LaFleur, Ph.D.

Rapamycin was originally used to prevent organ transplant rejection; now the drug is of interest because it influences cellular pathways involved in growth, repair and inflammation. A late-stage (phase 3) clinical trial will test whether low-dose rapamycin can improve healthy aging in adults aged 65 and older. Researchers will measure physical resilience, frailty and inflammation markers linked to age-related disease to assess effects on aging-related decline and healthspan.

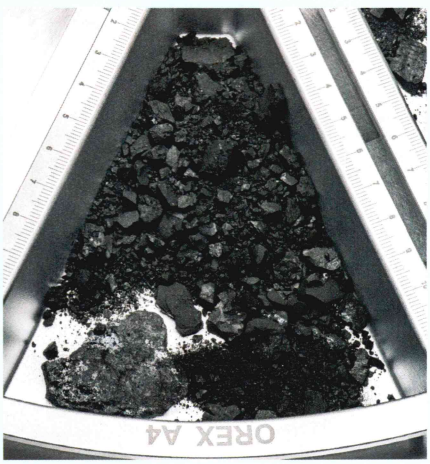
University of Arizona Office of Research and Partnerships Special Advisor for Fusion Energy Commercialization
Lead Researcher: Horst Hahn, Ph.D.



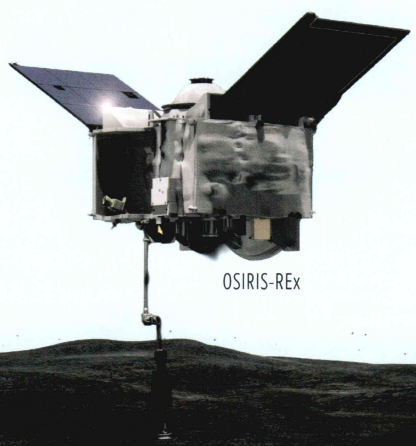
Fusion is the process of combining hydrogen nuclei into helium, releasing energy. In the sun's core, it occurs continuously — this is what makes the sun shine. A University of Arizona–led initiative is working to harness this process on Earth as a potential source of clean electricity. The effort focuses on developing technologies that can withstand extreme heat and pressure with the goal of enabling large-scale power generation.

Bennu

Lunar and Planetary Laboratory
Lead Researcher: Andrew Ryan, Ph.D.



NASA scientists expected asteroid Bennu to have a sandy surface, based on observations indicating low thermal inertia, which is inconsistent with solid rock. Instead, the OSIRIS-REx spacecraft found a surface dominated by boulders. Analysis of returned samples revealed highly porous rocks riddled with microscopic cracks. Researchers showed that these fractures interrupt and scatter heat flow, reconciling the earlier data with the asteroid's unexpectedly rugged surface. Bennu continues to speak.



OSIRIS-REx

INSTITUTIONAL UPDATES

KYL INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

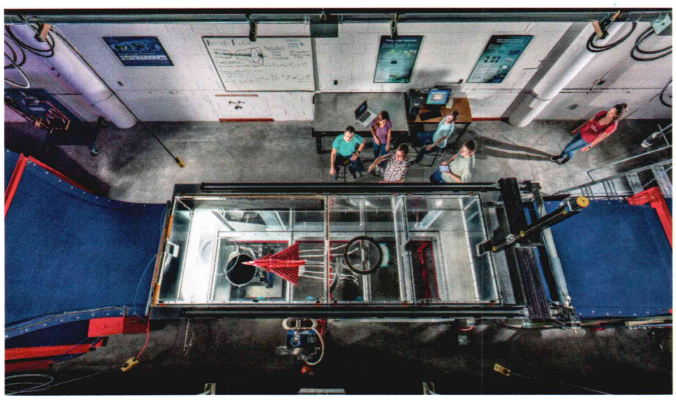


Photo: Steven Meckler

The U of A has launched the Kyl Institute for National Security, honoring alumnus Senator Jon Kyl '64 '66. Led by retired U.S. Air Force General Robin Rand, the institute aims to unite research in space science, optics, directed energy, hypersonics and secure communications to strengthen U.S. national security, support defense operations and train the next generation of national security professionals.

PRESIDENT GARIMELLA NAMED TO US DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

U of A president and distinguished professor Suresh Garimella is one of just 21 national leaders and two university presidents selected to serve on the Office of Science Advisory Committee at the U.S. Department of Energy. In this role, Garimella will provide independent scientific and technical guidance on Office of Science priorities, helping shape research strategy on energy, fusion, quantum science and interdisciplinary challenges.

COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING CENTER FOR SEMICONDUCTOR MANUFACTURING

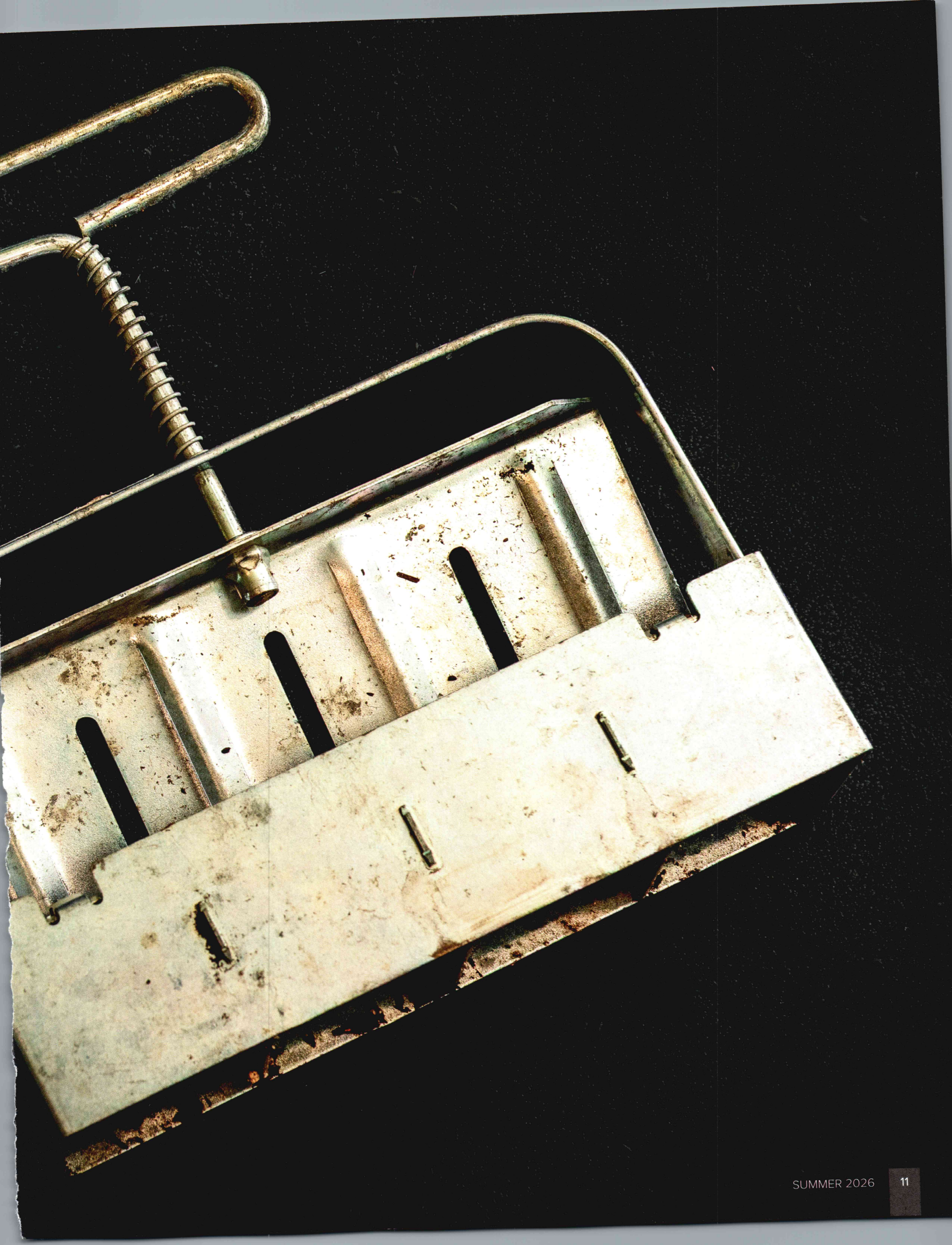
The University of Arizona has opened a newly expanded semiconductor cleanroom and nanofabrication facility within its Center for Semiconductor Manufacturing. Supported in part by a $35.5 million Arizona Commerce Authority investment, the upgraded lab provides advanced tools for chip fabrication, research and training at the nanoscale. The facility is designed to strengthen industry partnerships, expand workforce development and keep the U of A current in Arizona's growing semiconductor innovation ecosystem.

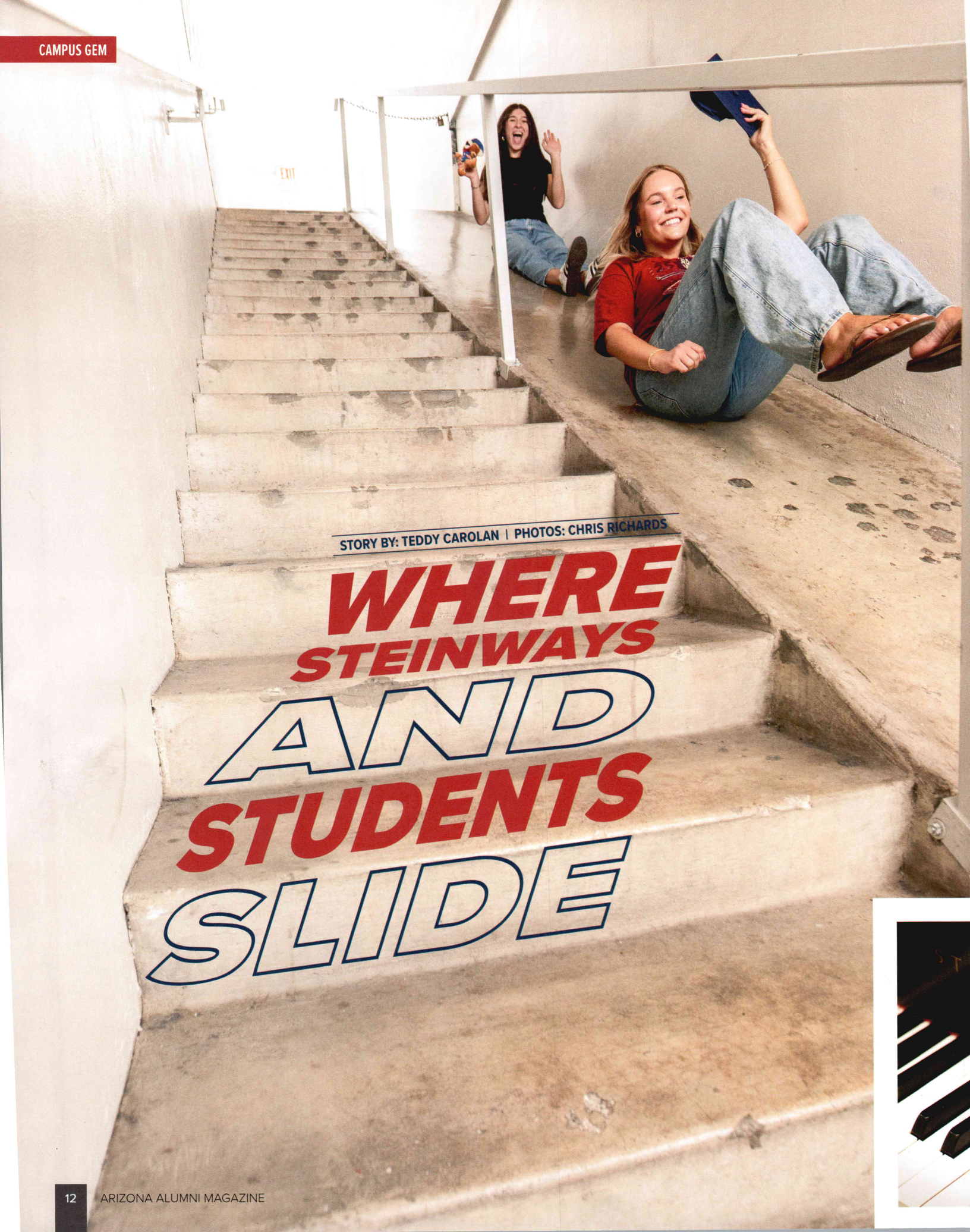
STORY BY: **TEDDY CAROLAN** | PHOTO: **CHRIS RICHARDS**

SUBJECT / OBJECT: SCHOOL GARDEN WORKSHOP SOIL BLOCKER

In most nurseries, this soil blocker would be a relic of pre-plastic propagation, too slow and fussy for commercial scale. At the University of Arizona's School Garden Workshop, such inefficiency is part of the point. Rather than dumping soil into plastic trays, the workshop's K-12 learners have a hand in each stage of the process, thanks to this sturdy contraption. Soil is packed, pressed and released into a neat grid of self-contained earthy cubes resembling brownie bites set for the oven. A dimple in the center — formed by a nub inside the press — marks where a seed will go.

"When we're working with kids in gardens, we want things to be a little inefficient so that more kids can participate," says School Garden Workshop Director Moses Thompson. "We want hands in the dirt. We want the tactile. We want students to feel it." Naturally, not all seeds they plant will germinate. The goal lies largely in the process: to reveal how deliberate and delicate the journey is for the plants that end up on their plate. ❖





STORY BY: TEDDY CAROLAN | PHOTOS: CHRIS RICHARDS

WHERE STEINWAYS AND STUDENTS SLIDE

The School of Music's instrument ramp finds a second life — and it's not musical.

Leading down into the School of Music's basement is one of the University of Arizona's most unusual dual-purpose facilities: a concrete slope that serves as both a ramp for hauling instruments and an impromptu recreational slide.

Installed long ago to safely transport pianos, harps, organs, xylophones (the list is fairly extensive), the slide has become something of a campus relic among students in recent years, with word of its existence traveling through obscure channels. If you aren't hearing about it on the U of A's (unofficial) Reddit page, it might be something you learn from an insider on campus.

What makes it handy for transporting instruments — the surprisingly steep incline, the smooth, polished surface — also makes it, in theory, amenable to students looking for a quick thrill between rehearsals. No burlap sack or piece of cardboard is required, just a push at the top by a fellow student. Depending on the velocity of that push, the descent down can be over in a flash.

In recent years, however, the slide's initial purpose has been somewhat supplanted by another, perhaps more prosaic technology.

"The slide," piano technician Cymone Vega says wryly, "the slide is mostly retired these days. We stick to the elevator now to move instruments — it's a bit more predictable."

As it happens, this past year has involved a lot of moving instruments at the School of Music, most notably a new fleet of upright and grand pianos made by Boston Pianos and sold by Steinway. The initiative to replace the school's 25-year-old inventory was made possible through grants plus some credit received for trading the old pianos back to Steinway, which took them off the university's hands to be restored and resold. After all, these were still fine pianos — even with the typical ensemble of cosmetic imperfections and loss of concert pitch. Vega agrees: "I'm partial to older Steinways. They tend to have a lot of character."

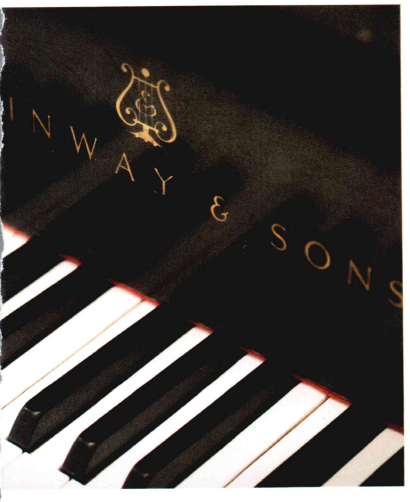
Being a piano technician, according to Vega, is all about upkeep and careful calibration. In her office, crowding the industrial shelves and workstations, are hammer shanks and tuning pins, disembodied keys and soundboard fragments. On the whole, it is a space that reflects a discipline requiring delicacy and practical craftsmanship.

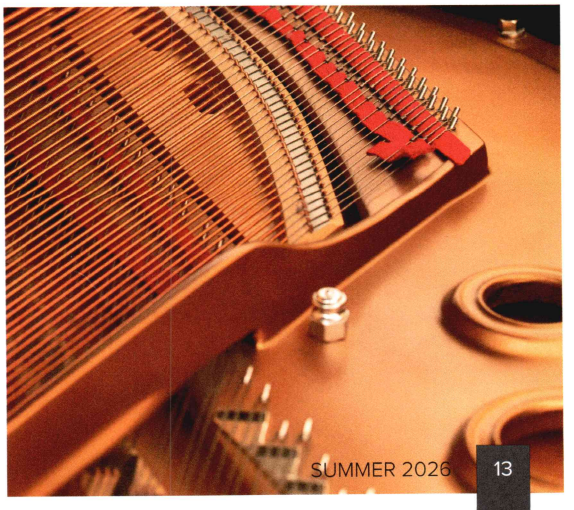
Indeed, watching Vega tune a rehearsal grand, it becomes clear that the work is as much about intuitive feel as technical precision and that a great piano technician doesn't merely maintain an instrument, but develops a relationship with it.

"While a home piano might be tuned twice a year, our performance halls and major classrooms are serviced daily or weekly because of constant use," she says. "We also spend time on regulation and fine adjustments, working closely with musicians to make sure the instruments feel and sound their best." Vega says some students even have preferences as to how weighted the keys are.

Naturally, the vigor and dedication students bring to the piano also leaves its mark. "A surprising amount of wear comes from the sheer intensity of students playing, which puts a lot of stress on strings, keys and hammers. The passion is wonderful to see, but it does speed up mechanical deterioration."

That's a fitting coda for a place where the line between grace and fervor runs thin. The same students spending hours coaxing a Brahms intermezzo to life are, apparently, also the ones taking a trip down the slide. The concrete ramp and the piano keys tell the same story: Music, at least here, is a full-contact sport. ❖

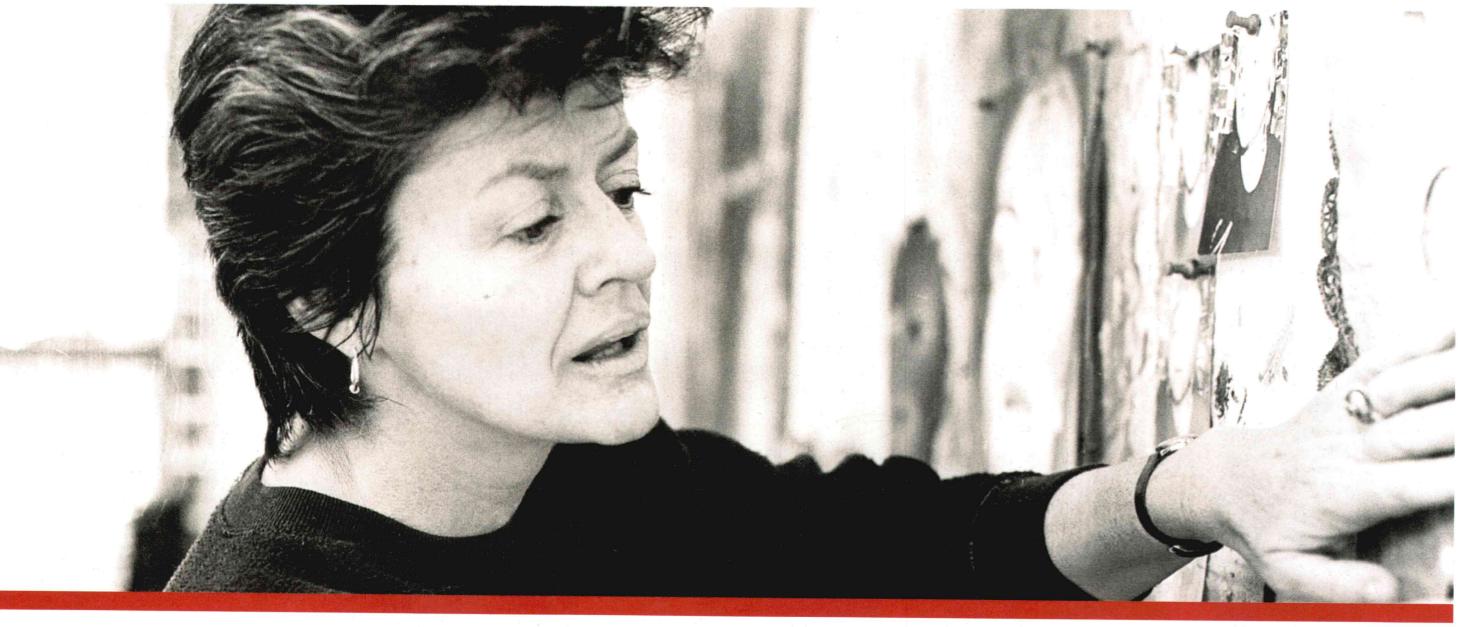




STORY BY: **MIKE POWELL** | PHOTOS: **PROVIDED BY THE U OF A SCHOOL OF ART**

WAYS OF SEEING

A recent retrospective of late School of Art Professor Emerita Bailey Doogan at the University of Arizona Museum of Art is giving Honors College students a chance to reflect instead of just react.



Right: Bailey Doogan, *Self-Portrait, Fingered I (Chin Finger), 2009,* oil on panel, courtesy of the Estate of Bailey Doogan

Patrick Baliani '89 first met artist and University of Arizona Professor Emerita Bailey Doogan at a dinner for the arts nonprofit Creative Capital in Phoenix back in the early '00s. Baliani, a professor of practice at the W.A. Franke Honors College, was already familiar with Doogan's work — at that point, visceral, expressive, often monochromatic paintings that confronted the realities of the aging female body — but had never met Doogan in person.

There was one seat left at the table when Baliani got there; Doogan was in one of the seats next to him.

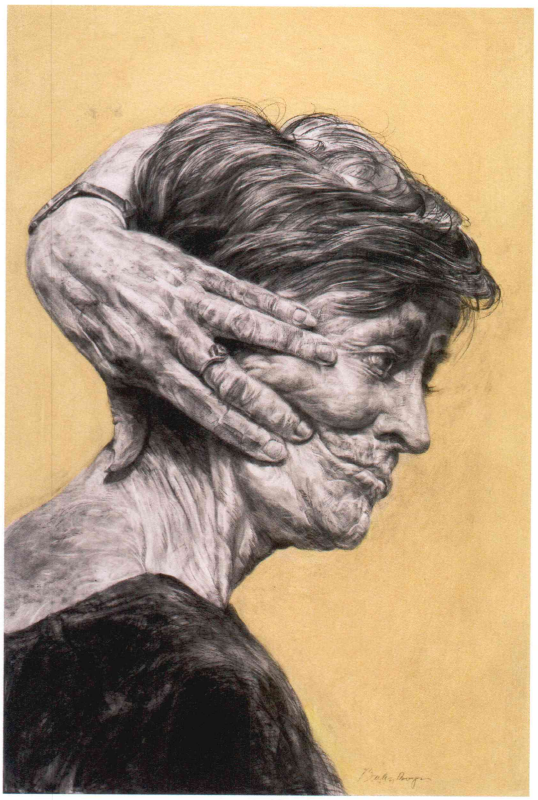
Doogan had already retired from the U of A, where she had taught for 30 years, first in graphic design and then in painting and drawing. (As a young designer in New York, Doogan famously developed the modern version of the **Morton Salt Girl** — the umbrella, the yellow dress; she later wrote about the experience, including the sexism she weathered in those offices, in a great essay called "Logo Girls.")

"She had a career," Baliani says. "You know — she was nationally known. The rest of us were doing what we could."

They struck up a friendship. Baliani asked if he could interview her for an essay he was writing about her work at Tucson's Etherton Gallery. Doogan said yes, but her tire blew out the morning of the interview, so they met at Discount Tire on Speedway. Two artists and professors exploring ideas at the Discount Tire — a very Tucson scene.

Doogan ended up becoming a regular guest in Baliani's Art and Anatomies class, lecturing on the history of representations of the human form while also sharing some of her own. She died in 2022, at the age of 80, but Baliani has continued to use her work in class. And recently, the U of A Museum of Art hosted a retrospective of Doogan's work called "Ways of Seeing," giving Baliani's students the opportunity to experience Doogan's work in person and over a series of visits, cultivating an intimacy and familiarity they might not otherwise get.

"I think everyone fears aging, or at least has trepidation about it," Baliani says. "But if you're young, you can always say, 'Well, I'm not there yet.' ... It's been fascinating to see young people's responses, because initially they're a little confused.



Bailey Doogan, *Split-Fingered Smile, 2013*, graphite on Duralar with Prismacolor on verso, courtesy of the Estate of Bailey Doogan

Bailey Doogan. Photo: courtesy of sartle.com

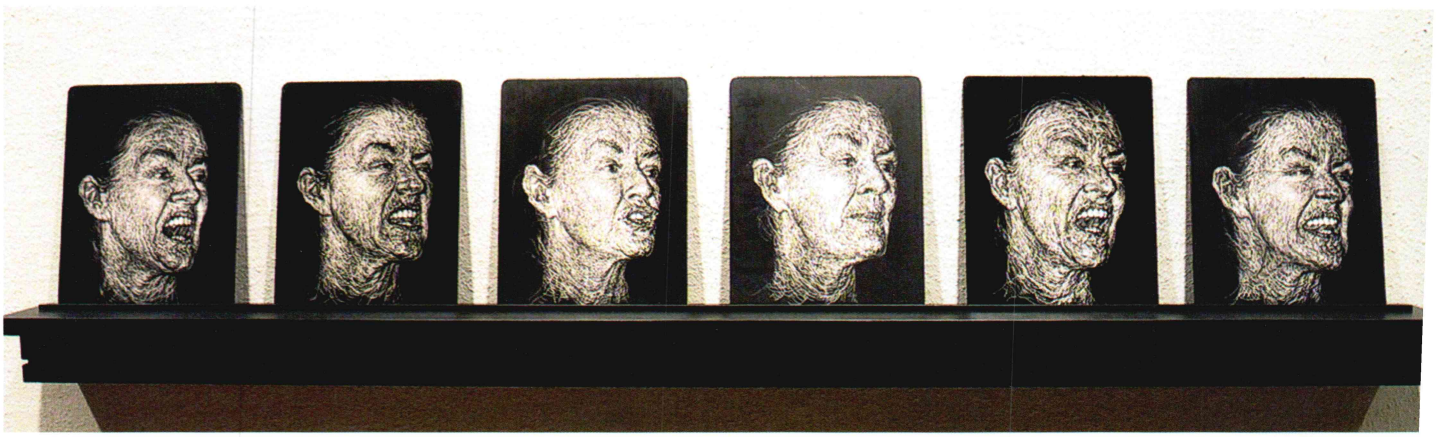
> *'These are facts of time,' [a male EMT writes.] 'To me, it is beautiful. Not in any erotic sense, but in the way all bodies are. The human soma embodies mortality. It is unapologetic in its appearance, accepting of its temporality, and marked by the time it has earned.'*

Photo: University of Arizona Museum of Art

Bailey's work is sometimes — there's a cognitive dissonance that happens. Almost simultaneously, you're drawn in, and you want to run away."

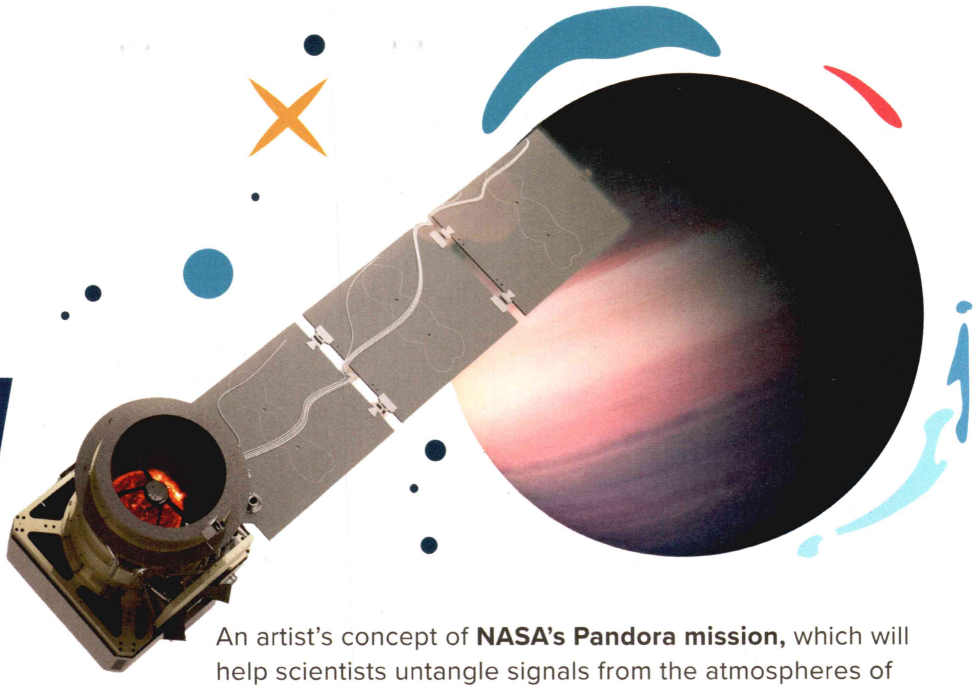
Baliani's students visited Doogan's work throughout the semester, documenting their responses, watching the shape of their thoughts change. One young woman describes the way Doogan "made me confront the way I've internalized comparison" through scrolling social media. Aspiring doctors and nurses note the refreshing anatomical honesty of Doogan's varicose veins and cellulite. A male EMT sees echoes of the female patients he has treated over the years, noting the way hair thins, nails gnarl and odors change. "These are facts of time," he writes. "To me, it is beautiful. Not in any erotic sense, but in the way all bodies are. The human soma embodies mortality. It is unapologetic in its appearance, accepting of its temporality, and marked by the time it has earned."

Some of the most interesting responses came from students who didn't like the work at first, or even at all, but made a good faith effort to set aside preference for the possibility of insight, leaving themselves open to that unresolved — and ultimately unresolvable — rush art sometimes delivers. As one put it, "I still do not like looking at these paintings more than I have to. But I viscerally feel what they are saying." ❖



Bailey Doogan, *Spell IV (Legman), 1997,* scratchboard, courtesy of the University of Arizona Museum of Art: museum purchase with funds provided by the Edward J. Gallagher, Jr. Memorial Fund

THE SKY ISN'T THE LIMIT



An artist's concept of **NASA's Pandora mission,** which will help scientists untangle signals from the atmospheres of exoplanets — worlds beyond our solar system — and their stars. Rendering courtesy of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center/Conceptual Image Lab

Photo: Chris Richards

Astrophysicist, Director of the Arizona Space Institute and content creator **Erika Hamden** has made it her mission to prove that the pursuit of knowledge is worth your time.

At the University of Arizona, the sky isn't the limit — it's just the beginning. As a major hub for astronomy and planetary science, the U of A is educating future scientists and fueling discoveries that expand our understanding of the universe. Learn how the U of A's work has led to significant breakthroughs in the history of space research.

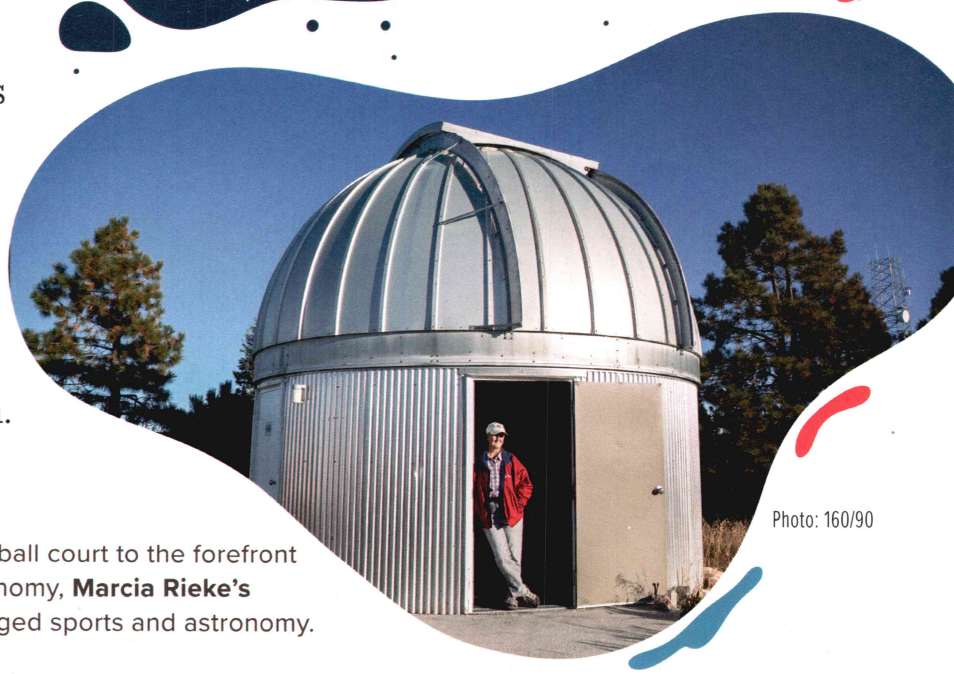


Photo: 160/90

From the basketball court to the forefront of infrared astronomy, **Marcia Rieke's** journey has bridged sports and astronomy.

Pandora is the first on-orbit NASA mission to be managed from the Multi-Mission Operation Center, or MMOC, marking a milestone in the U of A's decades-long history in space research and exploration.

Photo: Leslie Hawthorne Klingler

HOOPS AND STARS ALIGN

STORY BY: **DANIEL STOLTE** | PHOTO: **160/90**

From the basketball court to the forefront of infrared astronomy, Marcia Rieke's journey has bridged sports and astronomy.

Before Marcia Rieke embarked on a path that would lead her to help launch an entirely new field of scientific discovery — infrared astronomy — she hit the gym daily, chasing passes and scoring baskets.

"Before I had my career in astronomy, I played basketball in college, and that experience shaped me in lasting ways," says Rieke, a Regents Professor in the University of Arizona's Steward Observatory. "Being part of a team taught me discipline, resilience and the importance of showing up every day prepared to do your best. Those lessons stayed with me as I moved into science and research."

Since joining the U of A in 1976, Rieke has made seminal contributions to infrared astronomy that have shaped the field. Her work spans astronomical research, instrument development and service to the astronomy community through public policy and outreach — achievements that have earned her international recognition.

On Feb. 9, recognizing her accomplishments in both unraveling the mysteries of the deep cosmos and excelling on the court as an undergraduate, Rieke was named the U of A's Faculty of the Year award honoree by the Big 12 Conference.

Her most visible achievement is her role as principal investigator on NIRCam — the Near Infrared Camera, a key instrument aboard the James Webb Space Telescope. Since the telescope began scientific operations, NIRCam has both reinforced and challenged our understanding of the early universe, delivering stunning images and groundbreaking data that have captivated scientists and the public alike.

To Rieke, the connection between sports and research is an obvious one.

"When people say I'm a principal investigator, what that really means is that I lead a team," she says. "In that role, I have to be like the coach: I have to figure out which team member is best for which job — it's very much like the athletic enterprise."

And scientific discovery, similarly, is a team effort. Building instruments, conducting research and making discoveries require collaboration, persistence and trust among many people over long periods.

Rieke's work has focused on understanding the universe through infrared astronomy and on developing instruments that let us see what was previously invisible. Leading the charge in designing the NIRCam instrument from the ground up reflects decades of collaboration involving scientists, engineers, students and partners around the world, she says.

"Leveraging our longstanding experience in infrared astronomy, we succeeded with our proposal to build NIRCam," Rieke says. "We had good ideas that helped us win over competing proposals."

Universities like the U of A make this work possible by supporting long-term discovery and by engaging students directly in research, Rieke adds, noting that mentoring and working alongside students have been some of the most meaningful parts of her career.

"The U of A has always been very supportive, and the fact that I've been here for 50 years is a clue that this university has been a fantastic place to pursue research," she says.

And basketball? Rieke says her passion for the sport has stuck with her throughout her career, and she tries to catch a game whenever her schedule allows. ❖

Photo: Mike Christy

OUR LEGACY IN SPACE

1961 Mapping the Moon

When President John F. Kennedy announced that the United States would land a man on the moon, Gerard P. Kuiper and his team at the U of A created lunar atlases and maps that provided crucial insights into the moon's surface.

Apollo Missions 1969 - 1972

The U of A played a vital role in the Apollo missions, with Lunar and Planetary Laboratory astronomer Ewen Whitaker identifying the exact location on the moon of Surveyor 3. This crucial information enabled Apollo 12 astronauts to retrieve the film canister from the spacecraft.

1990 First Discovery of an Asteroid's Moon

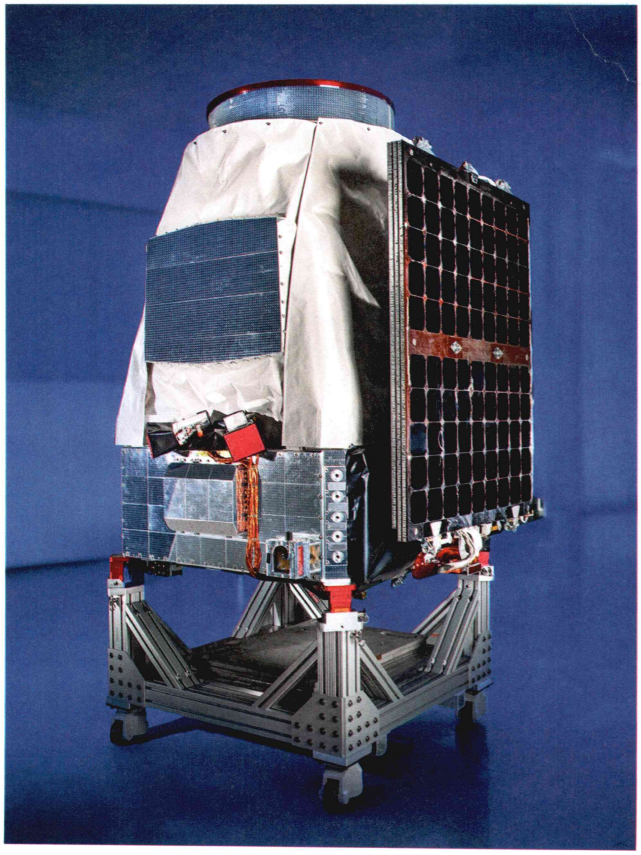
U of A researchers analyzed images captured by NASA's Galileo spacecraft and helped in the discovery of Dactyl, the first moon of an asteroid ever discovered.

Mars Odyssey Mission and Exploration 2001

The U of A played a major role in NASA's Mars Odyssey mission by contributing the Gamma Ray Spectrometer, which mapped the distribution of elements on the Martian surface — including hydrogen, a key indicator of water beneath the soil.

A WINDOW TO OTHER WORLDS

STORY BY: **ZOE MONTAÑO**



Pandora Team. Photo: Leslie Hawthorne Klingler

Top: Pandora's live feed shows the launch from Vandenberg Space Force Base. Photo: Kris Hanning

Left: This view of the fully integrated Pandora spacecraft was taken May 19, 2025, following the mission's successful environmental test campaign at Blue Canyon Technologies in Lafayette, Colorado. Photo: NASA/BCT

Through Pandora, the University of Arizona is helping NASA learn more about the composition of planets' atmospheres and search for habitable worlds.

For years, scientists have wanted to learn more about planets orbiting distant stars. A small satellite named Pandora is helping them find answers.

Pandora, NASA's newest mission, was designed to study the atmospheres of at least 20 known exoplanets, which are planets orbiting stars outside our solar system.

Equipped with an 18-inch telescope mirror and advanced spectroscopic instruments, Pandora will help scientists determine the chemical makeup of a star and the atmosphere of the planet that orbits it.

In January, Pandora launched aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9. About two and a half hours later, it deployed in orbit. Since then, Pandora has been managed by the University of Arizona's Multi-Mission Operations Center, or MMOC. It is the first astrophysics mission to be managed by the university.

"The University of Arizona has many decades of excellence in space sciences," says Daniel Apai, the U of A science lead of the Pandora mission and a professor of astronomy and planetary sciences at the Steward Observatory and Lunar and Planetary Laboratory. "I would say that [the U of A] has a culture that is really unique. There is no other place that executes this many programs of this scale that is this efficient."

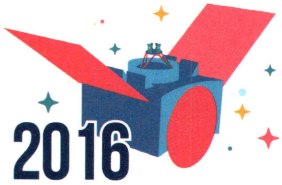
About every 45 minutes, Pandora has the potential to establish contact with a ground station on Earth. During these short windows, Pandora sends data and receives commands from the operations team.

The project addresses a longstanding scientific challenge. Around 2016, Apai says, then-doctoral student Benjamin Rackham '18, now a researcher at MIT, identified that the activity of host stars produces confusing signals that interfere with atmospheric readings from planets, a problem that even the James Webb Space Telescope couldn't overcome on its own. Pandora will act as a companion by specifically targeting this interference.

"We are really opening a window, a really exciting window, to other worlds," Apai says. "That's very exciting because it's part of a bigger quest to understand whether there could be life out there."

Although Pandora is described as small, the team behind it isn't. More than 300 scientists, engineers and mission specialists have contributed across NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Blue Canyon Technologies and the U of A.

"This is our best shot at figuring out what the atmospheres are made of and whether they could potentially harbor life," says Apai. "This is very exciting." ❖



2016
OSIRIS-REx Mission

The OSIRIS-REx mission, led by U of A researchers, collected samples — for the first time ever — from a near-Earth asteroid, Bennu. The mission has provided important insights, helping scientists understand the early solar system.

2019 **First Image of a Black Hole**

U of A astronomers and the Event Horizon Telescope project played a crucial role in the historic capture of the first-ever image of a black hole — a new chapter in our understanding of some of the universe's most mysterious objects.

2021
James Webb Space Telescope

The U of A developed key technology and instruments for the James Webb Space Telescope, including the NIRCam, or Near Infrared Camera, which helps researchers study exoplanets and distant galaxies and peer deeper into space than ever before.

STORY BY: **ZOE MONTAÑO** | PHOTO: **BRET HARTMAN/TED**

MAKING EVERY SECOND COUNT

Astrophysicist, director of the Arizona Space Institute and content creator Erika Hamden has made it her mission to prove that the pursuit of knowledge is worth your time.

Erika Hamden has a philosophy she describes as "somewhat grim": One day she is going to die.

"The only thing that is truly valuable is time," she says. "Am I doing something that is meaningful?"

It's the kind of question most people avoid, let alone think about daily. For Hamden, it's her fuel.

She is, depending on whom you ask, a telescope builder, a tenured professor of astrophysics at Steward Observatory, the director of the Arizona Space Institute, a TED fellow, a NASA honoree, a 2026 Guggenheim fellow and — to a quarter million people across Instagram and TikTok — a content creator who turns complex science topics into entertainment.

She does all of it, for the record, in very cool glasses and a bold lip.

Born in New Jersey, the fourth of five sisters, Hamden had a fascination with space from a very young age. As a kid, she figured out how to program her VCR to watch PBS documentaries.

"It was my thing," she laughs. "I just wanted to learn everything there was to learn."

In high school, she made what she called her "life plan": go to MIT and become an astronaut. It didn't go as planned.

"I went to MIT and hated it. I dropped out." It was, she admits, a difficult time — but necessary. "When I look back on it, it was really helpful and I was forced to figure out who I was as a person."

She transferred to Harvard and earned her bachelor's degree in astronomy and astrophysics. Then, instead of heading straight to graduate school like her peers, she enrolled at Le Cordon Bleu in London and worked briefly in a restaurant.

"Being a chef is an incredibly hard job," Hamden says. "And I really missed learning and using my brain in an analytic way."

She had deferred her graduate school admission for a year, but returned to earn two master's degrees and a doctorate from Columbia.

"Because of my experience dropping out of MIT, I've always felt like I want to make sure I'm doing something I love in the moment," she says. "Not waiting for some future payoff that may or may not happen."

Photo: Provided by Hamden

Hamden has built numerous telescopes throughout her career, including the FIREBall-2, a UV balloon-borne telescope that was built to observe faint emissions from distant galaxies.

During the coronavirus pandemic, a CBS children's science program called "Mission Unstoppable" asked Hamden if she could record a quick video sharing space facts for their social media.

She shot it in her living room. It got half a million views.

"I was like, 'Oh, wow!'" she laughs. They asked for another. And another. Eventually, Hamden started posting under her own name.

She's careful to say she isn't trying to be an influencer. What she's doing, she says, feels more like a responsibility. In a media landscape she describes as thriving on confusion and uncertainty, Hamden wants to be a voice that insists it is possible to know things.

"Scientists have an obligation to be in communication with the public," she says. "I think our society is in a state of crisis because of the lack of participation by scientists. ... In science, there is a very clear link between cause and effect. There is an agreed-upon reality that we share."

That conviction led to her book, "Weird Universe: Everything We Don't Know About Space (and Why It's Important)," which she wrote after a publisher discovered her videos.

While the book describes complex topics such as black holes, galaxies and space-time, Hamden says she wanted every chapter to feel as digestible as an Instagram reel. Not because she's oversimplifying or diluting information, but because she believes anyone can learn anything if they want to and have the time for it.

These days, Hamden is in the classroom at the University of Arizona, a place she wasn't too sure about at first. But on her first day, astronomers George and Marcia Rieke showed up at her office door and welcomed her with a hug. She had no choice but to fall in love.

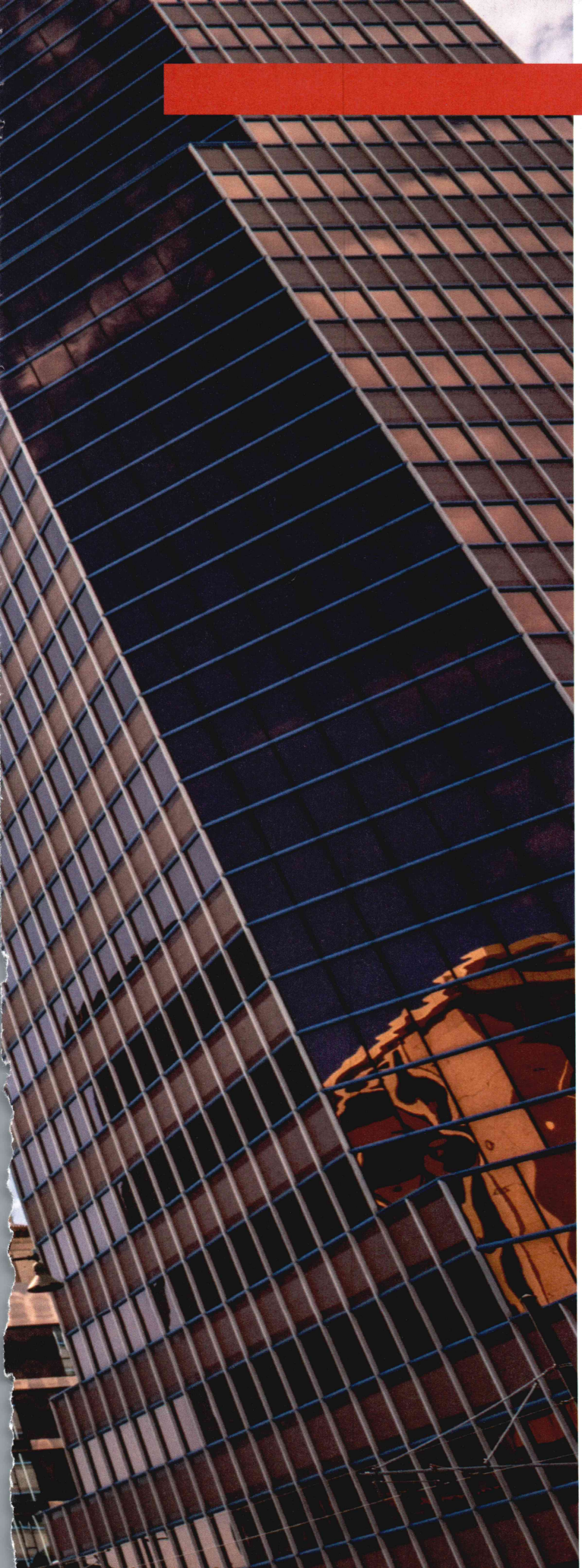
Now, Hamden is looking ahead. She's the deputy principal investigator for the U of A-led NASA Aspera mission, which will study galaxy evolution through observation of ultraviolet light.

That "life plan" isn't entirely off the table, either. She still hopes to become an astronaut.

"Space is awesome," she says. "The University of Arizona is the best place in the world for space sciences. It's such a treat that it's my job to come here every day and do it." ❖

TUCSON GROWN

STORY BY: **KYLE MITTAN** | PHOTO: **CHRIS RICHARDS**



Research by heat expert and College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture Professor Ladd Keith is shaping climate solutions worldwide.

Ladd Keith '03 '05 '19 grew up just miles from the University of Arizona campus in a neighborhood near Davis-Monthan Air Force Base called Terra del Sol — Latin for "land of the sun." He spent his summers doing what most Tucson kids of his generation did during the summer: Holing up inside to play hours of video games like SimCity — a game that lets players design their own modern metropolises.

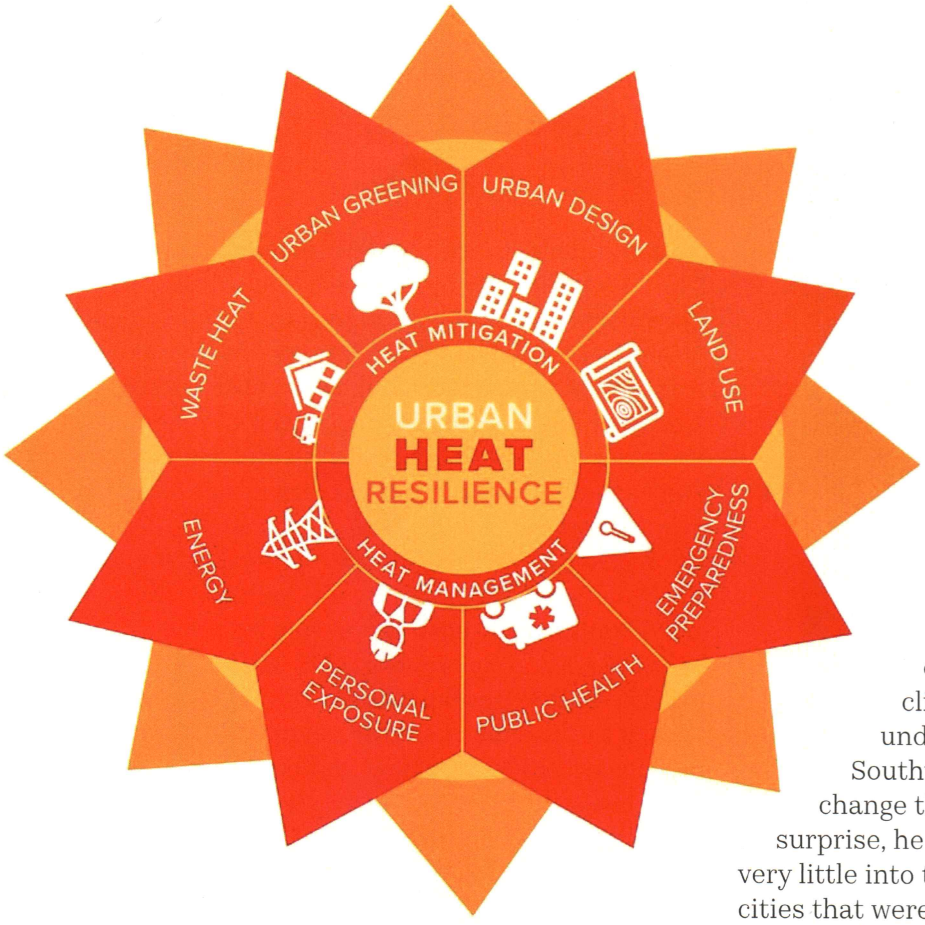
But Keith, now an associate professor in the U of A's School of Landscape Architecture and Planning, may have become an extreme heat expert *despite* growing up in Tucson — not because of it. "I never really thought about the heat in the summer, because when you grow up in a place like this, the heat just becomes all you know," he says.

Keith was in Japan right after his undergraduate program, on his first trip outside the U.S., when he began to understand what urban planning was. As he explored dense metro areas like Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, he couldn't help but notice how much more walkable they were than his hometown. It was his first practical understanding of the field, and it inspired him to apply to the U of A's urban planning master's program a week after returning home.

"When I was on that trip, all of it collided — SimCity, Japan, Tucson — and I thought, 'This would be a really cool direction to go in,'" Keith says.

Now, Keith is one of the country's foremost experts on planning for extreme heat, the No. 1 weather-related cause of death in the U.S. Alongside his faculty appointment, he also is the director of the Heat Resilience Initiative in the university's Arizona Institute for Resilience, and has led federal grants that help cities improve their response to extreme heat.

Before his epiphany in Japan, Keith attended the U of A College of Fine Arts on a writing scholarship and earned a bachelor's degree in media arts. Still enamored with



In 2022, Keith helped define a basic framework for planning for urban heat resilience. Resilience strategies largely break down into two categories: mitigation strategies, such as building shade structures and green spaces that reduce the built environment's contribution to urban heat, and management strategies, such as cooling centers and warning systems, to prepare for and respond to heat risks.

storytelling but unsure of his next move, he took the trip to Japan — and found his calling. After his master's program, he was well on his way toward a planning career when Hurricane Katrina devastated cities like New Orleans. He was not near the disaster, but headlines about it helped sharpen his focus as a planner.

"I was just struck by the fact that, not only could we design our cities better, but some of them are very poorly designed for low-income folks and marginalized people," Keith says. "I realized, not only do we need to plan our cities better, but we have to consider weather and climate change, too."

As a master's student, Keith got hands-on experience helping plan towns in Arizona, including Oro Valley and the unincorporated Arizona City in Pinal County. He later was appointed to the City of Tucson's planning commission, for which he served as chair and led the process for a new general plan in 2013.

Around that same time, Keith began his doctorate in the U of A Graduate Interdisciplinary Program for Arid Lands Resource Sciences, one of the first and only programs of its kind focused on desert climates. Keith's focus was on understanding how cities across the Southwest were addressing climate change through urban planning. To his surprise, he says, climate change factored very little into the general plans for many Arizona cities that were growing hotter by the year.

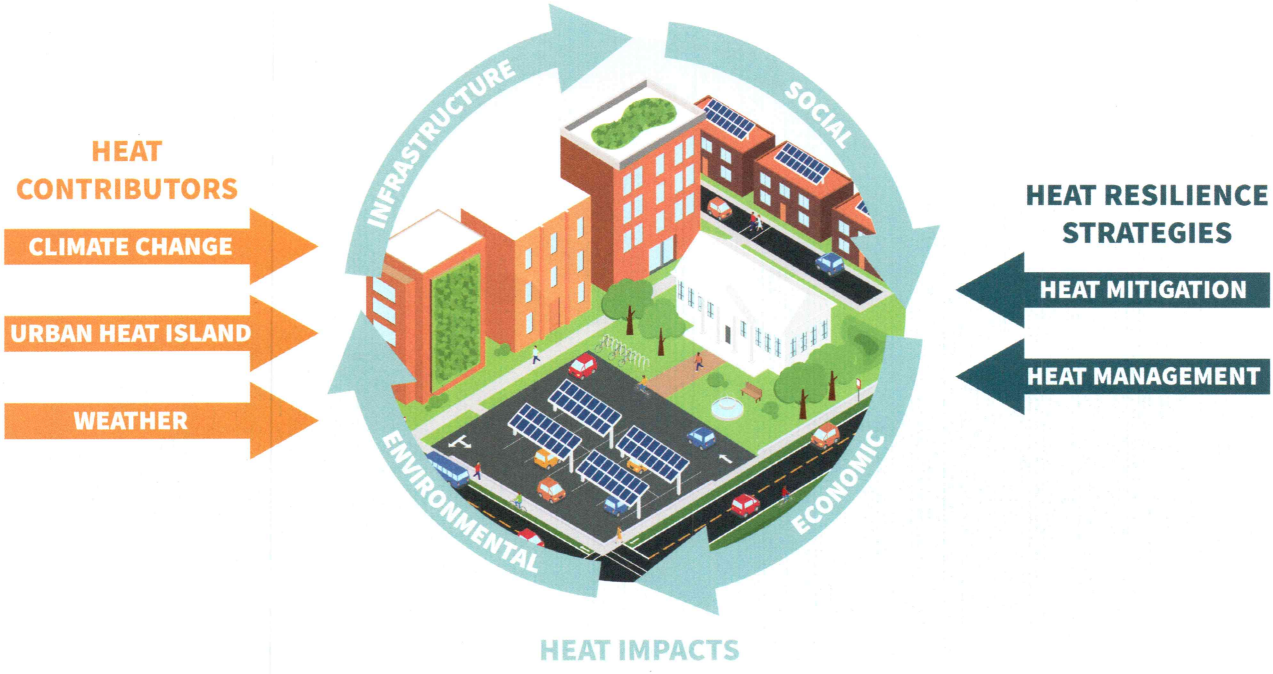
Even fewer plans back then were considering heat the same way that plans would account for other natural disasters. Many other types of disasters have long been met with interdisciplinary solutions, Keith says — the federal government has tracked droughts, for example, since the Dust Bowl.

"Heat requires the same transdisciplinary approach, but it's only recently been recognized as a serious hazard, so we didn't know until a few years ago what connections needed to be made to address it," he says.

As a social scientist, Keith often sees himself as the connective tissue for teams of climate scientists, public health professionals, fellow planners and other experts. And as a storyteller at heart, his goal with any project is to turn findings into practical results for as many people as possible.

"The storytelling and the results of my research are probably my favorite part of it," he says.

COMPONENTS OF URBAN HEAT RESILIENCE



Along with Sara Meerow, a frequent collaborator at Arizona State University, Keith co-wrote Planning for Urban Heat Resilience, a guide published in 2022 by the American Planning Association. It was the first of its kind to focus on extreme heat.

Keith then led the U of A's share of the Southwest Urban Integrated Field Laboratory that spanned all three state universities to study the impact of extreme heat in Arizona's metro areas. The program, funded by the Department of Energy, involved students and researchers from across the state taking detailed weather measurements in Arizona neighborhoods. Keith, as leader of the Heat Resilience Initiative, is now working to compile the data and translate the findings into plans or policy recommendations that could protect residents from increasingly hotter climates.

He's led similar work on behalf of the U of A as part of the Center for Heat Resilient Communities, partnering with researchers from ASU and the University of California, Los Angeles. The project, funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, took best practices and findings from leading city heat plans and translated them to more universal guides that other U.S. cities could implement.

One of Keith's proudest contributions, he says, was serving as lead author on a 2021 comment article in the journal Nature. The article laid out a set of guidelines that city-level policymakers could use to ensure their city plans protect residents from the risks of extreme heat. The article informed the U.S. federal government's National Heat Strategy and Maturity Model for Heat Governance in 2024 and the United Nations Extreme Heat Risk Governance Framework and Toolkit in 2025.

"As an academic, to have your work not only cited by other academics but actually used in federal and U.N. guiding documents is an incredible impact," Keith says.

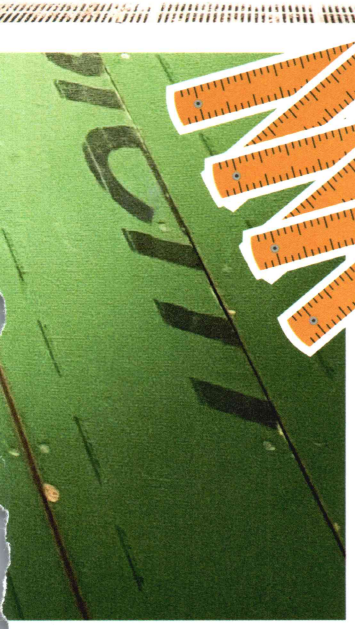
Even as his work extends its reach well beyond campus, Pima County and even the country, Keith never forgets where he came from.

"My connection to the desert is probably the clearest line through everything," he says. "And I was absolutely shaped by the U of A's land-grant mission. All of my research is focused on advancing society and returning practical benefits to people." ❖

IT TAKES A (MICRO SHELTER) VILLAGE

How students and researchers from CAPLA and the Drachman Institute are working with government and community partners to make a lasting impact on how Tucson houses homeless people.

STORY BY: **MIKE POWELL** | PHOTOS: **KYLE MITTAN**



In the spring of 2024, Courtney Crosson — an associate professor at the University of Arizona's College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture (CAPLA) as well as the director of CAPLA's research and community outreach wing, the Drachman Institute — got a call from a man named Chuck Dunn.

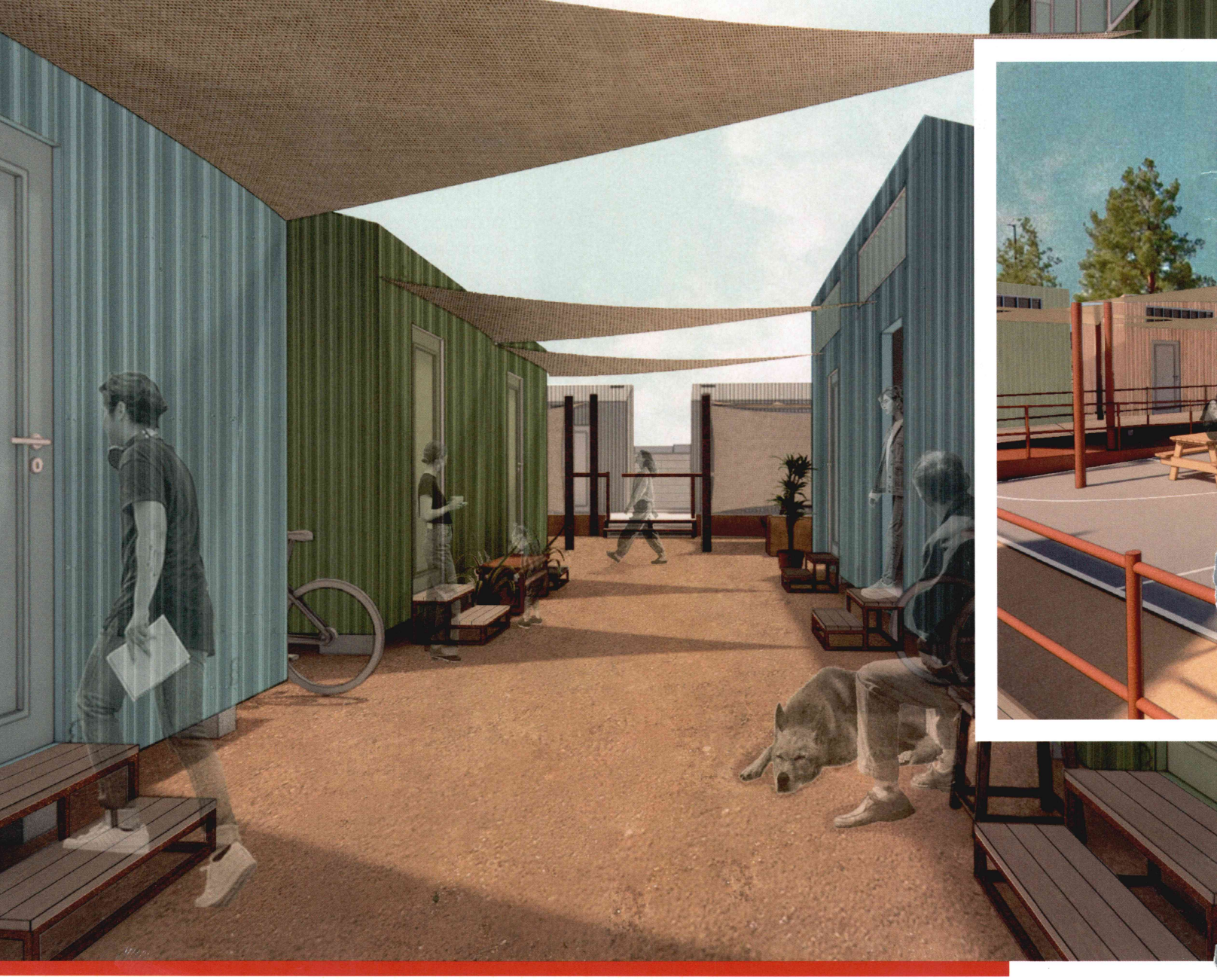
Dunn, the executive director of a local nonprofit called the Tucson Hope Factory, had recently gotten back from Seattle, where he'd toured a village of one-room dwellings called tiny houses, or micro shelters, designed to provide transitional housing to local homeless people. They were private, they were affordable, and they seemed to be working. "It was like, *shazam*," Dunn says. "'That's what we need here.'"

A couple of years earlier, Bill Mackey '94, a Tucson architect and assistant research professor at Drachman, had compiled a research paper commissioned through Drachman by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) identifying the limits to innovative, affordable housing types in Tucson. Part of what the paper showed was how the steady expansion of parking requirements within the city had made the development of medium- and high-density housing in Tucson effectively impossible. A parcel that, in the early 1950s, could have accommodated eight units with eight required parking spaces, for example, would until recently have required nine parking spaces and only supported six units.

"You reduce your tax base, you increase your heat island effects, you reduce the number of units available to renters," Mackey says. "It's lose-lose-lose."

Drachman, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, is in the unusual, amphibious position of being able to operate within the university and in direct collaboration with community and governmental partners, including the City of Tucson. Mackey's paper went to the city council and ultimately led to a change in the parking code — a solution that was friendly to development while also pushing back on our ever-increasing reliance on cars. ("I can put that on my headstone," he says. "'I helped change parking in Tucson.' I'm really proud of that paper.")

Could Drachman help reframe the problem of housing for homeless people in a similar way?



Meanwhile, Crosson reached out to architect and CAPLA Associate Professor of Practice Teresa Rosano '94 '20 to propose a micro shelter project as the focus for Rosano's capstone studio — essentially, CAPLA's senior thesis project. (There are five capstone sections, each with a different theme; Rosano's was community design and action.)

Rosano ended up co-teaching the studio with Greg Veitch '23, at the time a Drachman research coordinator, whose background in the nuts and bolts of construction and design-build work served as a complement to Rosano's focus on community research and outreach. (Veitch was also continuing to research and write papers with Mackey.)

Veitch says that balance of the conceptual and the practical is something CAPLA is especially — and increasingly — good at. "We're moving toward something we call 'design research' or 'performance-based design,'" he says. "That's kind of how the whole profession is moving. And the U of A has had a pretty strong pedigree of that."

For many students, the studio was the first time they'd built anything they could actually walk around in. It was also the first time they'd engaged the social and cultural questions around homelessness so thoroughly. Josh Russell '25, who took on the role of filming interviews with local homeless people at community-services sites like Gospel Rescue Mission and Youth on Their Own, had gone into the semester assuming it was essentially a problem of supply and

The Community Design & Action Capstone Studio, led by Teresa Rosano and Greg Veitch, engaged 16 fifth-year architecture students from the University of Arizona's CAPLA School of Architecture in designing transitional micro shelter villages, in collaboration with Tucson Hope Factory and the Drachman Institute. Renderings courtesy of CAPLA

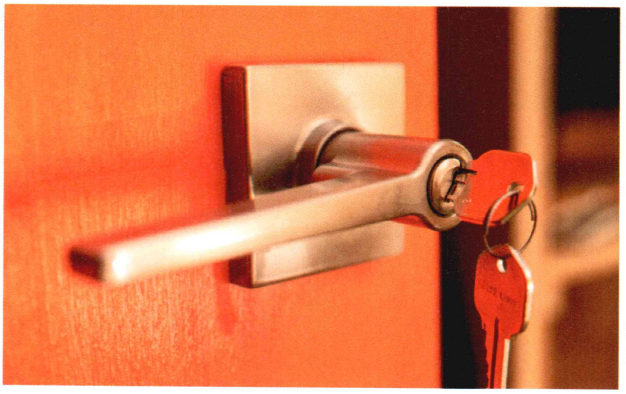
demand: Build more houses, house more people. But the more he listened, the more he understood homelessness as a condition often inextricable from substance abuse and mental health issues.

"If you're going to build this community, you have to supply services to these people, you have to put more intention behind it than just saying, 'OK, here's a shelter,'" he says. "It was a perspective shift."

Carolina Durazo '25, who produced what was effectively a user manual for the physical assembly of the shelters, found that working with community partners helped her realize the importance of being able to communicate clearly and accessibly with people from a variety of backgrounds. "Architecture school — it was like coming from a different world," she says. If volunteers didn't understand the group's vision once the studio was over, how could the shelters get built?

Broadly speaking, the studio was a success — Rosano and Veitch even won some awards for it, including the Community Design Award from the Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Architects and a Collaborative Practice Award from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture.

Rosano is particularly proud of the way the students surmounted the usual hazards of groupwork in order to see the project through. "If you'd asked me in the beginning what I thought about having [16 students] collaborate on one project, I would've said it was a bad idea," she says. "They felt like they were working toward something bigger and outside of themselves that could help people — that became a driving motivation for collaborative effort."



A vision was there, a prototype built, but there remains the stubborn question of where in Tucson a project like this might feasibly be brought to life. The students had designed both the shelter and a plan for how those shelters might be situated around communal facilities — a village — using the site of St. Francis Community Services, another nonprofit co-founded by Chuck Dunn, but the site was in a floodplain. Since the conclusion of the studio, Crosson and Mackey have been working with a site operated by the Primavera Foundation, a Tucson-based organization dedicated to improving opportunities for local homeless people since the early 1980s. (The group was co-founded by Nancy Bissell '67, whose name is etched on an arch in the Women's Plaza of Honor next to Centennial Hall — a project Mackey, coincidentally, helped design.)

Mackey and Veitch's research into the zoning and code restrictions around micro shelter development, as well as their search for an answer as to how that development might be more easily facilitated, wrapped up quickly. "If you're a pregnant teen, handicapped physically or mentally, elderly group housing, a homeless person, whatever — if you want to create any sort of development for these kinds of people, you have to go through a process with mayor and council," Mackey says — that's it. "It's really kind of depressing when you think about it. All these people that are having a hard time have to go through a six-to-18-month process in order to get housing."

If, however, homelessness were considered a municipal emergency, the code restrictions would be more flexible. "Portland did it, Seattle did it, Denver did it," Mackey says. And as of February 2026, so has Tucson.

"[The emergency declaration] is a huge impact that few people realize the U of A had a hand in," Crosson says. "We're contributing to our community." The project's future isn't settled, but, on a logistical level, it's viable now in a way it wasn't before. (Mackey and Drachman Research Coordinator Jessica McQuillen have retained the capstone students' basic shelter design, making adjustments as needed — what Mackey calls "micro shelter 2.0.")

As the project continues to evolve, Drachman is working with campus partners at the College of Medicine – Tucson (including Dan Beskind, an associate professor of emergency medicine) and the Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health (Sheila Soto '17 '22, a research professor) to establish a clinic within the village to provide medical services.

Crosson says the breadth of the project illustrates what makes Drachman singular within both the U of A ecosystem and the broader community. "We can start by identifying a policy challenge and then see the solution through across scales of impact," she says. "From changes in policy language, to testing physical prototypes, to working with community partners to construct a village that can materially change people's lives based on those changes to policy language. And it requires a team of partners, too: our students, government, researchers from colleges across the U of A, and most importantly, the community partners that propel the work."

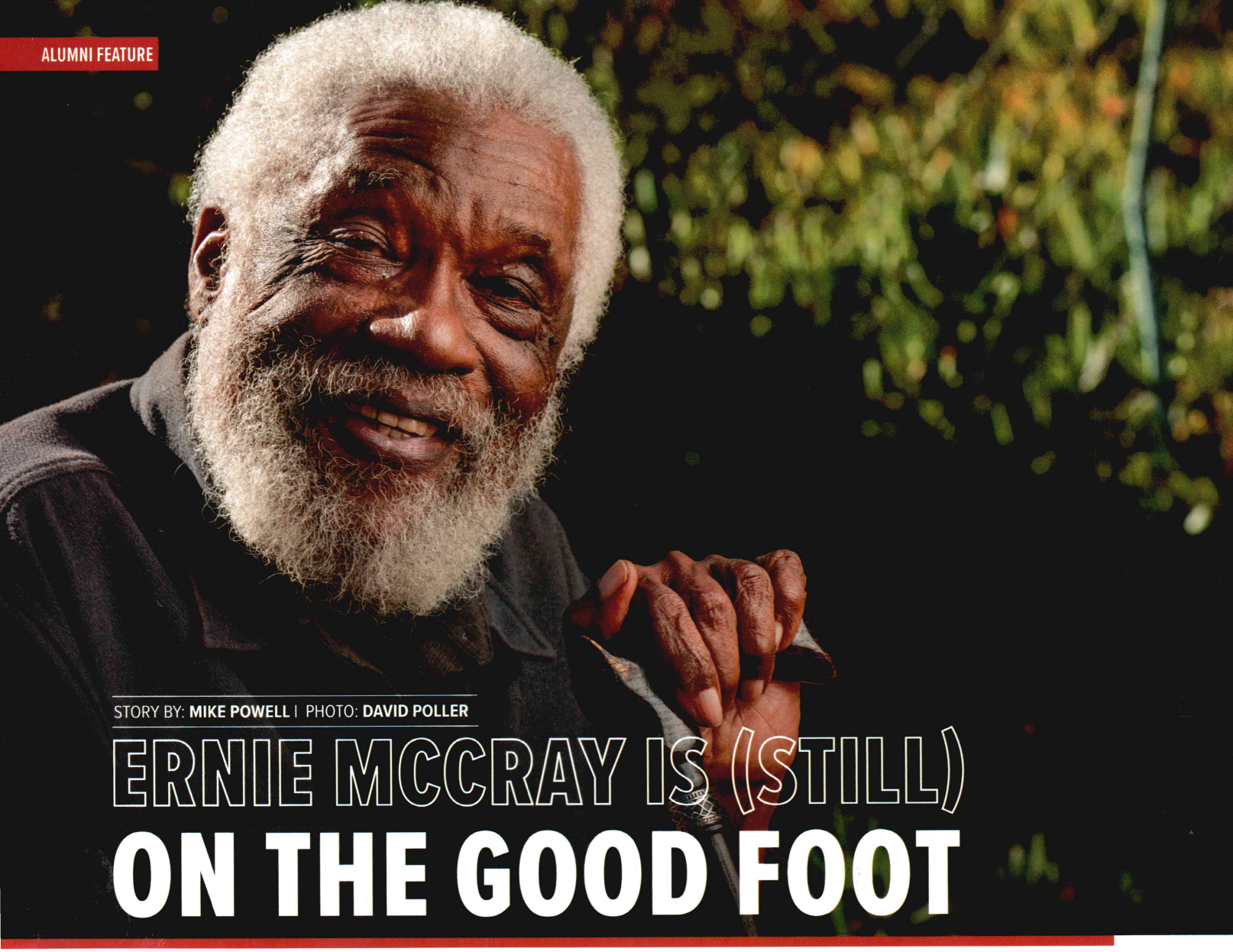
If, however, homelessness were considered a municipal emergency, the code restrictions would be more flexible. "Portland did it, Seattle did it, Denver did it," Mackey says. And as of February 2026, so has Tucson.'

Chuck Dunn of the Tucson Hope Factory describes it as a thousand-piece puzzle. "My kids grew up here," he says. "They're all Wildcats. My wife's a graduate of the medical school. It's in our blood for us to want to make Tucson a better place. And to do that, I need these — all these other pieces. They all have to fit together."

From these pieces, a picture emerges. Greg Veitch describes the details the studio sifted through in putting together their prototype design — the balance between privacy and communality, the reflective metal cladding that outperforms stucco in the desert heat. "It sounds silly," he says, "but even the ability to operate a window creates agency in people that might not otherwise feel it or have it." ❖

Contribute to the Drachman Institute and Tucson Hope Factory's continued micro shelter efforts.

give.uafoundation.org/drachman-institute



STORY BY: **MIKE POWELL** | PHOTO: **DAVID POLLER**

ERNIE MCCRAY IS (STILL) ON THE GOOD FOOT

Poet, educator and Wildcat basketball legend Ernie McCray '60 '62 has lived on planet Earth for nearly 90 years. He doesn't move like he used to — these days he gets sore just playing the bongos. But he's still listening, still learning, still working for justice and arguing with his dog ("an órale kind of dude"), and still finding the bright side in a sometimes very dark world.

In the mid-1960s, Ernie McCray '60 '62 used to hang out at a hotel in San Diego where they put on talent shows. At the time, McCray was in his mid-20s, but he already felt like a much older man: three kids, a doomed marriage, joking — cynically, melodramatically — about putting a lawyer on retainer because he didn't know what he'd do next. "That low," he says.

One night, he decided to try some stand-up comedy. He'd never done stand-up before, but figured — why not? "A lot of people — because this was the '60s — were trying to imitate Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary and that kind of thing," he says. "I could sing, but I didn't have a song prepared, so I riffed on that." *Here I am,* he told them. *I don't know what the hell I'm doing here, but here I am.*

Just a few years earlier, McCray had been flying through the air in Bear Down Gym, a record-breaking center for the University of

Arizona Wildcats (he still holds the single-game scoring record for his 46 points against Cal State Los Angeles in 1960), the first Black basketball player to graduate from the U of A.

On the court he was a star; after the game, he was just another Black man in segregated America, practically having to press his mouth to the metal on "colored" water fountains because the pressure was so weak, barred from restaurants downtown no matter how many points he scored.

It's the little things you remember — the water fountains. He'd seen them traveling through the South to visit family. "I'd look over at the 'white' water fountain, and the water would just be gushing like a geyser. And the one we drank out of, you pretty much had to French kiss," he says. "To a kid, you just don't have any understanding. I remember asking my mother, I said, 'Why do people hate us?'" Her answer was unsatisfying and true: "'That's just the way some people are.'"

The prize for the talent show was $25 — a pretty good chunk of money in the '60s, especially for a schoolteacher like McCray. He won. His off-the-cuff, totally unplanned stand-up routine conjured out of the depths of his desperation. "It was such a good feeling, because my life was just tragic at that point," he says. Him and his wife, fighting all the time ("two fools"), his kids caught in the middle. "That feeling kept me alive," he says. "That and my kids."

The question is, would you have been able to do the same? To go up in front of a roomful of strangers at your lowest point and make them laugh? Would you have the strength to laugh yourself?

Ernie McCray is 88: the number of keys on a piano, the number of constellations in the sky. He doesn't move like he used to — these days it's enough just getting out of his chair.

As a kid growing up in the Dunbar neighborhood just west of the U of A campus, he used to visit his neighbor, an older woman, to write poems and stories on her typewriter. "I just thought that was the most exciting thing in the world," he says. "To be able to write something down and have somebody read it."

"'You're so smart,'" the woman would say, patting him on the head. "You're like Langston Hughes," and he'd walk out filled with ice cream and Kool-Aid, feeling great about himself. Ernie McCray never bought into the idea of being less than; for a long time, he didn't even realize his school — the Dunbar School, on Second Street and 11th Avenue; the building is still there — was segregated. "I've been loved," he says. "And when you're loved, you can take all that crap."

The writing is almost constant now: poems, essays, reflections on current events, little bits of life mustered into words, published on San Diego-area blogs and community websites. Yes, writing is the new thing now, or the old thing in a new light (because the light is always changing) — a thread that has run through his life from childhood to 88.

He remembers interviewing for a job as a principal, at the John Muir Alternative School in San Diego. The interview panel was made up of both kids and adults — that's how the school was run, with a sense of equity. One of the students asked: "What if you were out on the playground and saw a kindergarten kid crying in the sandbox?" McCray said he'd sit down in the sandbox and see what's going on — how else could you find out what was happening in the sandbox? "And those kids were *leaning* forward," he says. They weren't used to adults getting in the sandbox like that, but he was right: How else could he know?

So, there's the writing, there's a little light exercise, there's listening to music on his Alexa speaker (she responds in the background when he mentions her name). "I'll beat on my bongos every now and then," he says. "But lately, it kind of tightens my upper back, so I don't do that as much as I used to. And I argue with the dog you just heard barking," he says. "Nacho. He's an órale kind of dude."

Órale, meaning something like *hey!* but also *OK!* or *right on!* or *sounds good!* or just *cool*. McCray recently published a poem for his current wife, Maria — OK, they're not married, but they call each other husband and wife, who's counting? — that used the word as a kind of guiding principle: "An 'Órale' to Maria Nieto Señour, My Querida." He wrote it on the occasion of Señour winning an award from the California Association of Latino Community College Trustees and Administrators for her

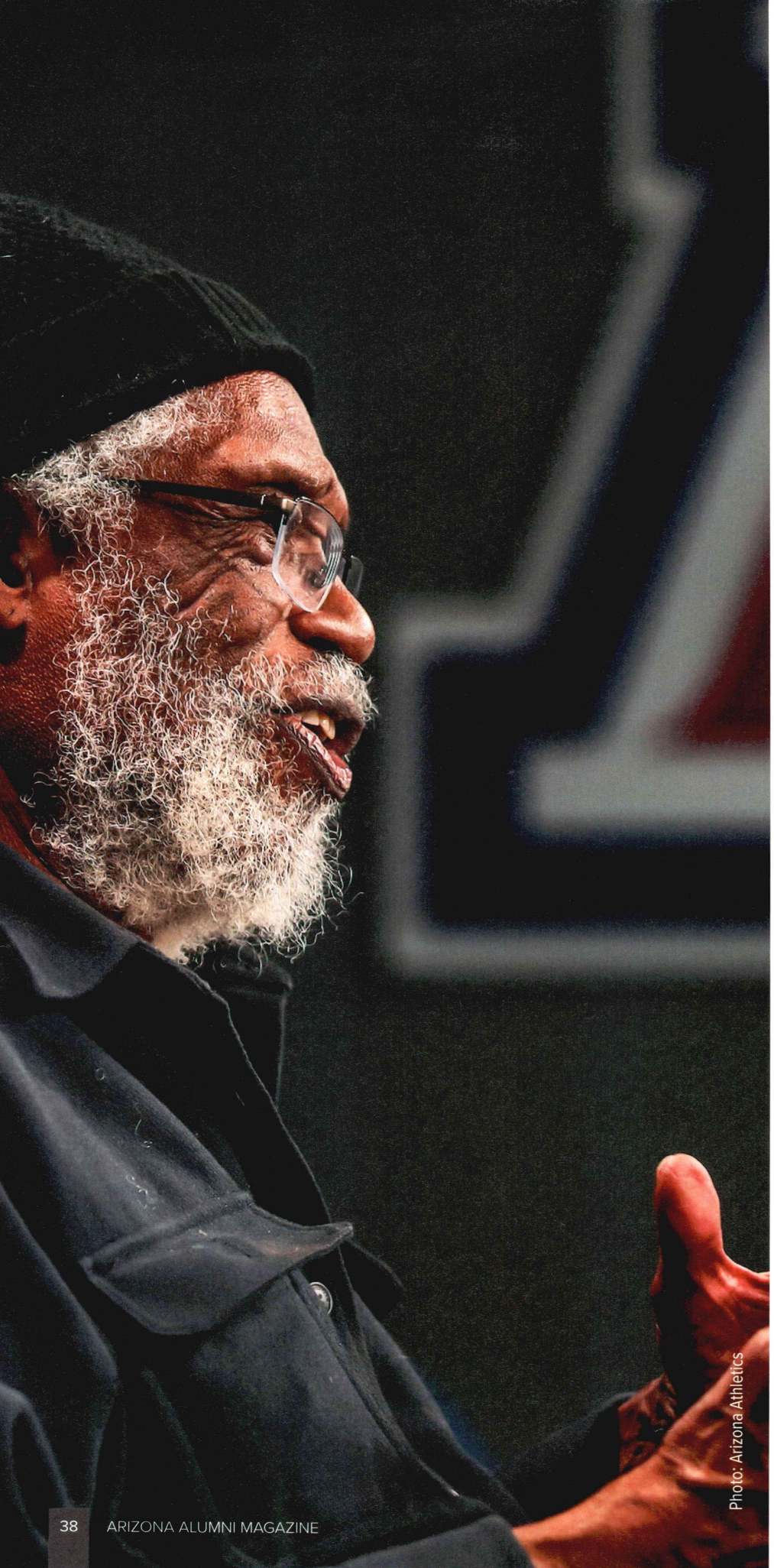


Photo: Arizona Athletics

35 years of service to the San Diego Community College District. Señour has been trying to get McCray to go to bed earlier. "She's, like, a nine-o'clock-go-to-bed-type person," he says. Too early for him. He's got writing to do!

McCray used to practice on the court behind the Dunbar School, running drills, taking shots and hustling for his own rebound, going up against that invisible player in his head. One-on-none, he called it. "Then I'd go home and shower off, and all was right with the world."

"Let's put it this way," he says later. "I like me. I'm the best company I've ever had." The blank page, the empty court, him and his imagination, his soul.

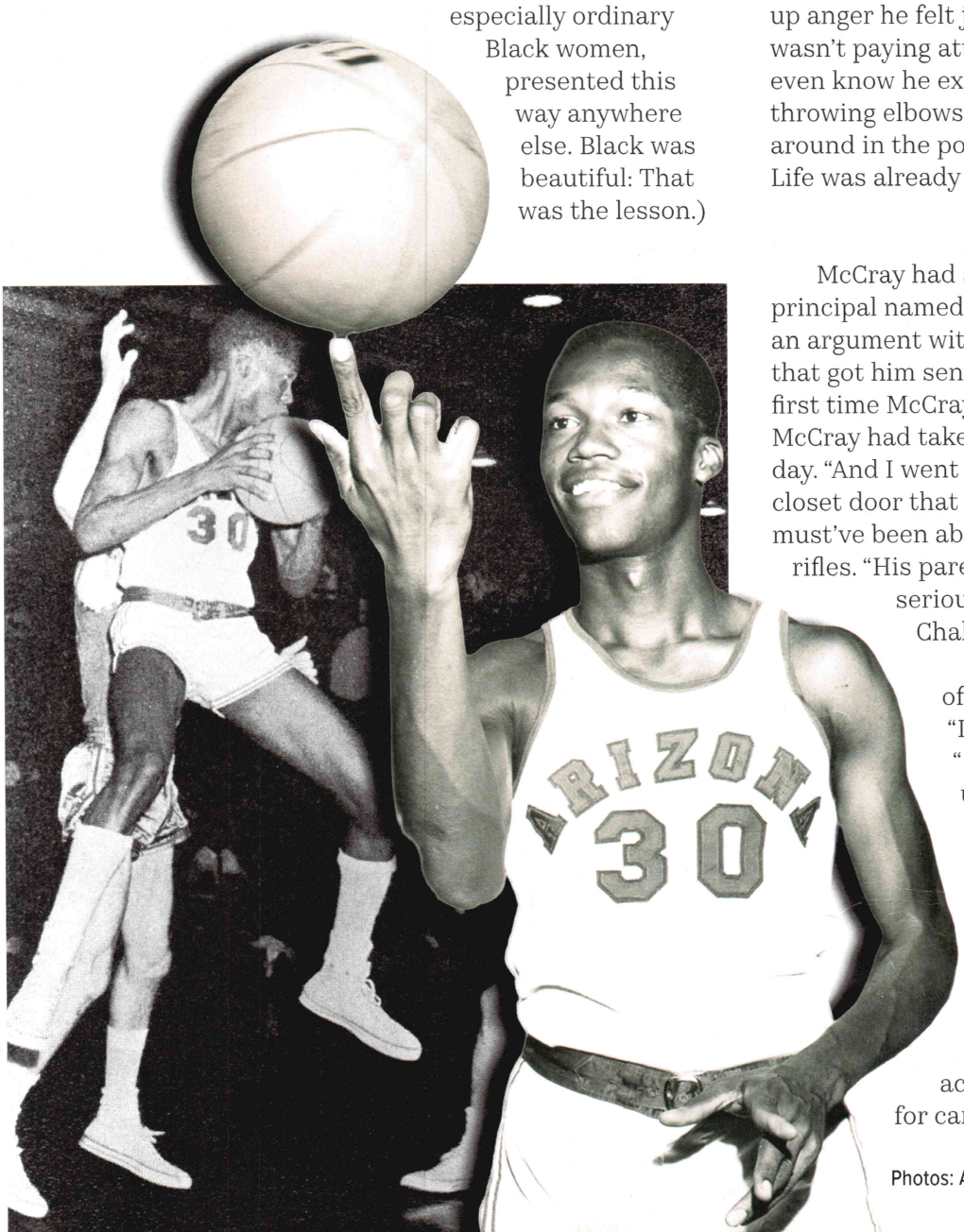
He developed his style from his friend Albert Neely, who played at Phoenix Union High School before going on to Arizona State University. "He had this gliding kind of thing," McCray says. "I was always smooth, but I took it to another level, patterning my game after him. I thought it gave me a little edge." He'd watch the other players on the court, hustling all over the place, swinging their elbows and blowing their energy for nothing. "And I'm just gliding, like it doesn't matter to me at all."

His mother, Mary, had graduated from the prestigious, historically Black Howard University in Washington, D.C. before coming to Tucson for her respiratory issues stemming from tuberculosis. She hustled as a janitor and an Avon lady and a haircutter before finding a stable job at the telephone company when McCray was in his teens. Mary, who brought Ernie to lectures and forums and concerts on campus, to see Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King; who wanted him to understand and maybe even try and change America, not just live

in it; who treated him as though he was a person of substance and worth, whose voice mattered, Jim Crow be damned — that gliding drove her crazy. "That's kind of my personality," he says. "She was more Type A." McCray says she was one of the most amazing people he ever knew.

As a teenager, he loved getting Jet magazine. The pop stars, the Civil Rights coverage, the big and small of Black life in postwar America: Jet covered it all with a breadth and generosity other magazines didn't. Like Black life was like white life: a full experience, not just some niche thing.

He especially looked forward to what they called the Beauty of the Week, a centerfold-type series that took ordinary, working Black women — not movie stars or models — and presented them almost like pinups. Now this was important. (Really, it was: You didn't see ordinary women, especially ordinary Black women, presented this way anywhere else. Black was beautiful: That was the lesson.)



In late 1955, McCray was eagerly flipping through the latest issue of Jet and found a very different kind of image: the body of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Black boy beaten to death, lynched and mutilated by three white men in Mississippi who claimed he had flirted with a white woman.

"Something went to the hate in me," McCray says. He remembers walking around downtown Tucson, about to pop. "I was behind this white woman at Congress and Stone," he says. "And I'm behind her, and she's not paying any attention to me, and I'm just hating her." McCray was 17 — just a few years older than Till. Was this how the world saw him — a threat, even as a kid? Was this what justice meant?

Then the light turned green and the woman crossed the street and all that hatred and balled-up anger he felt just evaporated. That woman wasn't paying attention to him — she didn't even know he existed. All those people out there throwing elbows, wasting energy, thrashing around in the pointless drama of their inner lives: Life was already hard enough. Why not glide?

McCray had a student during his years as a principal named Chaka. One day, Chaka got into an argument with a teacher and called her a name that got him sent to McCray's office. It wasn't the first time McCray and Chaka had talked — once, McCray had taken Chaka home after another bad day. "And I went into the house, and there was a closet door that was kind of open," he says. "There must've been about 10 AKs in there" — assault rifles. "His parents were both gangsters. I mean, serious gangsters." That was home for Chaka.

Now Chaka was in McCray's office, trying to explain himself. "I believed him," McCray says. "[The teacher] had him backed up against a wall, and Chaka was just one of those kids that wasn't going to take that stuff. She'd disrespected him." The name Chaka had gotten thrown out of class for calling the teacher — McCray was saying it in his head.

McCray had had a politically active young life. He'd canvassed for campaigns with his mother and

Photos: Arizona Athletics

McCray at his Wildcat Ring of Honor ceremony at McKale Center on Jan. 21, 2023 | Photo: Arizona Athletics

helped set up get-out-the-vote barbecues. He remembers gathering in neighbors' backyards to hear candidates running for local office — sheriff, for example — explain where they were coming from: a conversation of special importance for Black residents wondering whether this guy was going to treat them like human beings. Later, he worked with a group on campus called Students for Equality to try to raise awareness about the racial and economic injustices perpetuated by local Jim Crow laws, including housing covenants, often taking the conversation to city council meetings. Yes, life was unfair — but it was definitely fairer to some than others.

"'Isn't that Ernie McCray over there?'" he remembers people saying when they saw him at protests back in his U of A days. "'I can't believe he'd do something like that.' Like I wasn't human and didn't care."

People are always talking about how hard teaching is, he says: getting on kids' levels, understanding what's really going on in the sandbox, opening yourself up to the raw nerves around justice and compassion. "It's the easiest damn thing I've ever done in my life," he says. "But that doesn't mean there isn't work to it." McCray gave Chaka a suspension — he had to. But he also got where Chaka was coming from.

His favorite age, by the way, is 8: that sweet spot between being too young to know much and too old and cool to be caught dead knowing it. You talk to a room full of 8-year-olds and say, "Who wants to ...," and you don't even get to finish the sentence before hands start going up. The ideas are good, too: lucid, innovative, genuine. An 8-year-old won't BS you, he says — we could all use a little more of that. "I've tried being an adult a couple of times in my life," he says. "And I end up thinking, 'Oh, this is *not* working.'"

Somewhere deep in McKale Center is a folder in a filing cabinet labeled ERNIE MCCRAY. In that folder is a partial paper trail of McCray's Wildcat life:

typed-up pages of statistics, Xeroxed, annotated and Xeroxed again; black-and-white photos of McCray with the photography studio's stamp on the back (some by legendary Tucson photographer Jack Sheaffer); a draft of former U of A basketball player Allan Stanton's remarks inducting Ernie McCray into the Arizona Sports Hall of Fame. (Stanton did the honors at McCray's request, which came in the form of a handwritten letter, also in the folder, in which McCray describes Stanton as "an all-time athletic great who played in the 1700s" in big, loopy cursive letters — you can almost feel McCray laughing through the pen.)

Then there's a single-page essay written by McCray in an earlier incarnation of this magazine from the spring of 1989. It starts with the basics: born in Tucson, Wildcat from childhood, experiences with segregation, the joy he felt as a kid running around on campus. Then it turns, slightly. "I love the University of Arizona," he writes. "Yet there were times — as happens in all love affairs — when I could have taken that institution by the neck. I expected much more than it could give."

He describes the political science class where a professor told him the problems he and his fellow activists faced attempting to fight discriminatory practices in Tucson weren't worthy of discussion, and the class where South Africa came up, but nobody was willing to discuss apartheid. "As a child, I loved the school blindly," he writes. "But as a young adult I found it reflected the times."

Times changed. "The Tucson I visit today is refreshing," he writes toward the end. "Stores where blacks once could only work as janitors now have black managers. When I stop by campus, I see more young black men and women than in the late '50s. I see black cheerleaders. There were none in my day. I see black athletes utilizing their skills as a means to an education." He calls the U of A "an institution that represents hope."

"You know, after the '60s, the Civil Rights Movement, the '70s and '80s came along," he says here in 2026. "I knew there were racists out and about, but they were quiet, and that was so nice. I mean, I felt that viscerally, you know? The quietness." He has more than usual to write about lately on that front: more poems, more stories, more reflections on the past, which always turns out to be closer than we think.

Ernie McCray is 88. He is old enough to have played in Bear Down Gym (no air conditioning) and to have grown up watching Linc Richmond '49 (who had the Wildcat career scoring record until McCray beat it in 1960) and Roger Johnson '52 when Johnson was the basketball captain one season and an All-America baseball pick the next. McCray recently saw a picture of himself as a much younger man, flying through the air with a basketball in his hand, and thought *that couldn't be me.* He just couldn't prove that he — the person he is inside, that kernel of him that has gone unchanged over all this time, that Little Langston Hughes playing one-on-none at the typewriter, first in Dunbar, then in San Diego, as a schoolteacher then a principal, a father then a grandfather — could still jump like that.

It's early afternoon. A canvasser comes to the door asking if McCray knows about a proposition currently on the ballot in California. McCray not only knows about it — he's already voted. There is a brief, energetic discussion. The canvasser and McCray thank each other, and McCray makes his way back to his chair. There's a game on tonight, and he's excited. "This team — I've never seen an Arizona basketball team that looks as good as these guys do," he says — and this was in *November,* before the streak record, before the AP polls, before the Final Four. "They just seem to click."

You'd think that someone so invested in Tucson — so inextricably linked to its history and changes — would've stayed, or at least come back, but McCray is one of those people who for whatever mystical reason loves the ocean. He can't leave it. "If you've ever lived by an ocean, it's just — it's almost unexplainable," he says, his voice getting lighter and dreamier, his pauses longer. "You're at the edge of a continent!" *Órale.* ❖

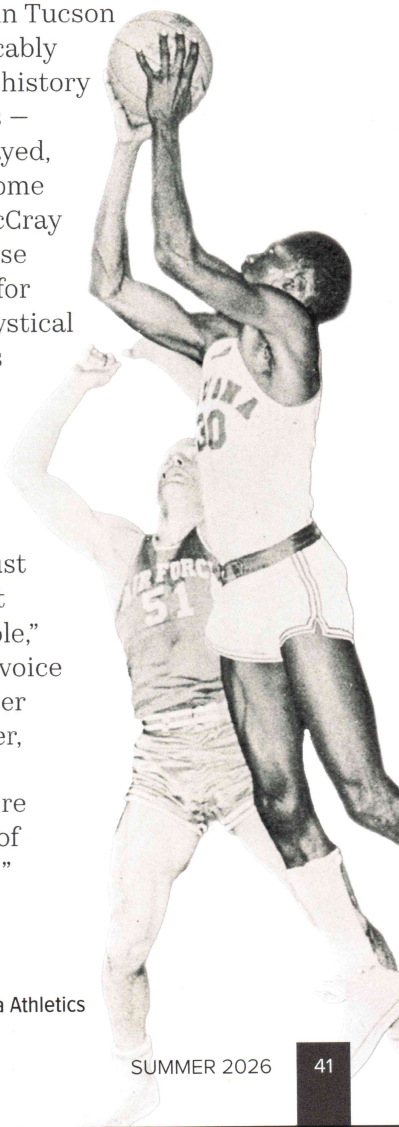


Photo: Arizona Athletics

STORY BY: **MIKE POWELL** | PHOTOS: **CHRIS RICHARDS**

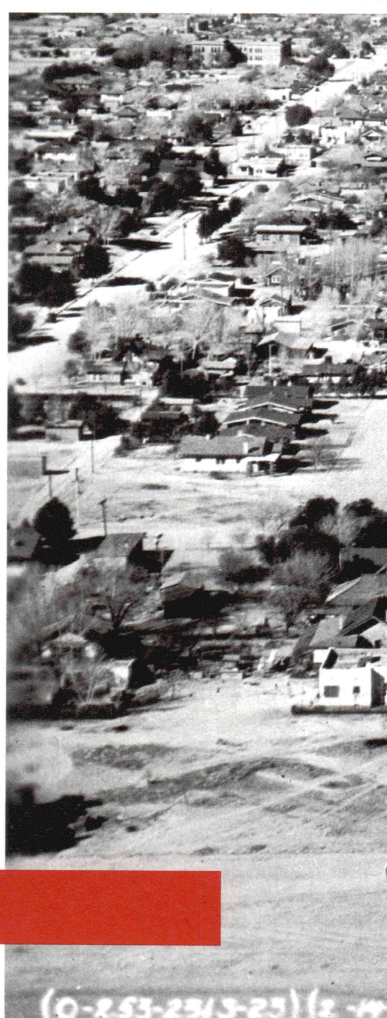
BEAR DOWN GYM, THEN AND NOW

A look inside a transformative case of adaptive reuse.

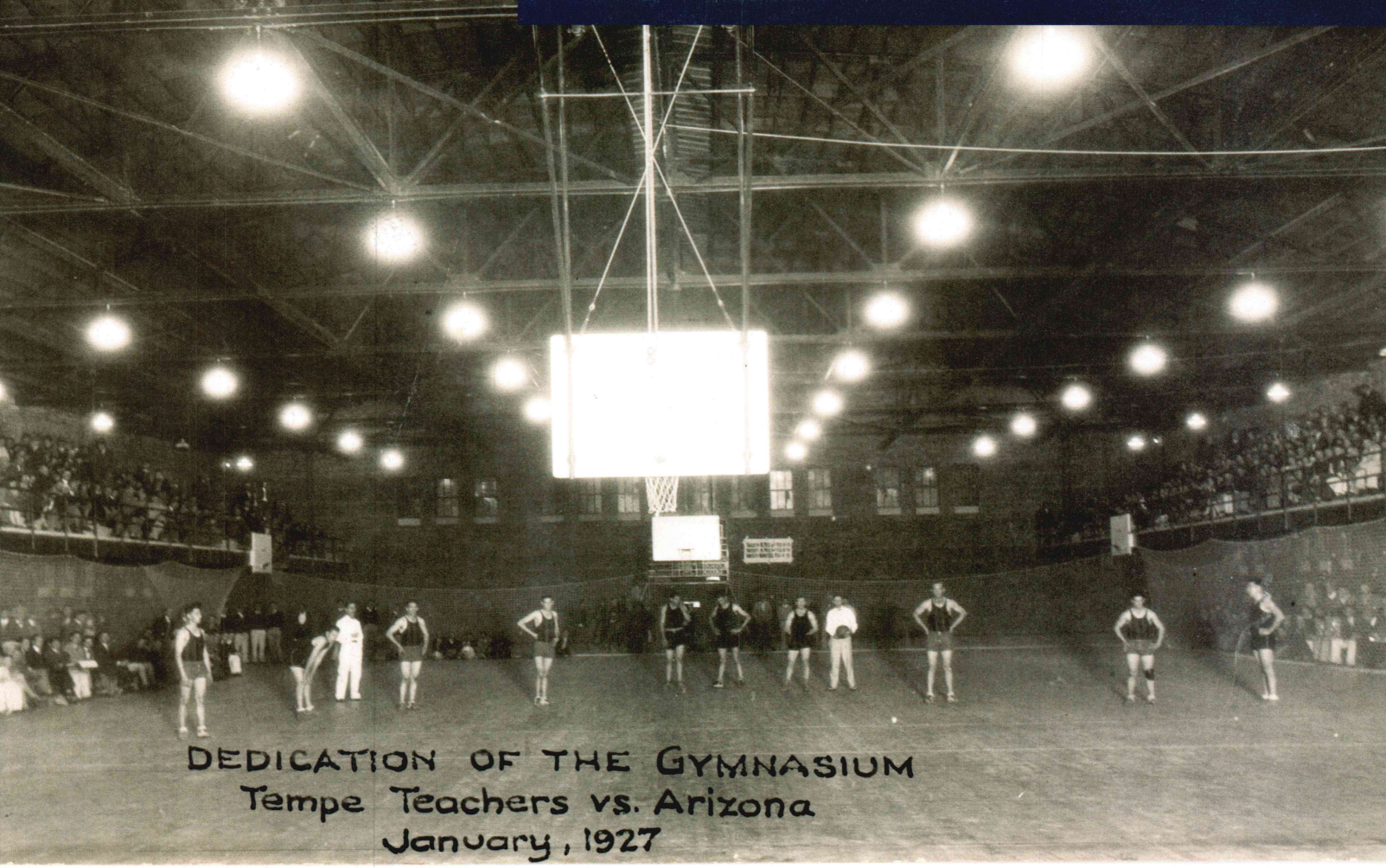
Buildings, like people, go through phases: the vacant schoolhouse turned affordable housing in a rebounding downtown, the old post office incorporated into the modern train station next door. When architect Corky Poster of Tucson firm Poster Mirto McDonald took on the job of rehabilitating Bear Down Gym in 2013, it was effectively a cubicle farm: its basketball court covered in carpet squares, its windows plugged up by duct work. "It looked awful," Poster says.

It was also, he adds, absolutely correct. "When you put a big hole in the wall in order to get [ducts] in, it might look better, but now you have a big hole in the wall," he says. "You've damaged the historic resource." In Bear Down's case, you could pick up the carpet squares with your hands and still see the court underneath — ugly changes, but reversible ones.

Poster, a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the University of Arizona College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture who has worked in historic preservation in Tucson for more than 50 years, compares the project (and others like it) to a person in intensive care. "Your body is lying in the bed, and it's you, and there's all this other stuff going in and out of orifices, but it's keeping you alive. And when you're better, all those things get removed and you're still the one in the bed."

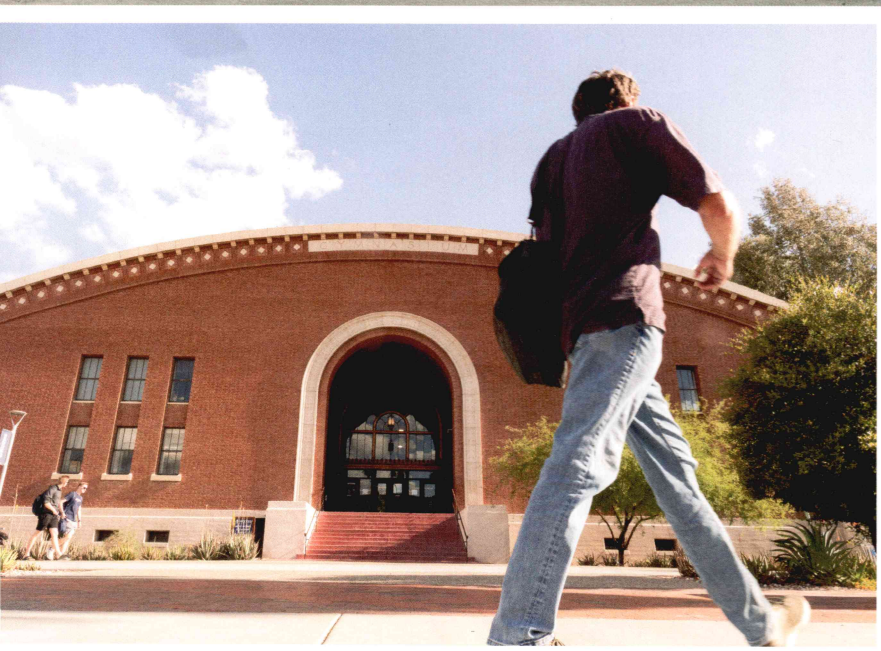


Top photo: Special Collections, the University of Arizona
Bottom photo: Courtesy Arizona Daily Star


DEDICATION OF THE GYMNASIUM
Tempe Teachers vs. Arizona
January, 1927

"BEAR DOWN"

Bear Down Gym 1926 | Photo: Special Collections, the University of Arizona



Bear Down Gym 2026

The Bear Down Gym you walk into today is, in part, the Bear Down students walked into a hundred years ago, whether to register for classes or watch basketball or go to a dance (and there were, it seems, many, many dances). "Everything in that first section is nostalgia," Poster says. "So, Joe Alumni from the class of '57 can walk in and say, 'Wow, I remember how cool this was.'" Beyond it is something new: a three-story steel structure that combines offices, study areas and student support spaces, a satellite Campus Recreation Center, and the campus's first interfaith reflection room.

Importantly, while Bear Down used to exclusively face north, toward the Mall, it now also opens south, to the new Bartlett Academic Success Center and the Student Success District, creating a conversation between old and new space in a part of campus that had always been pretty well trafficked but felt infrastructurally neglected.

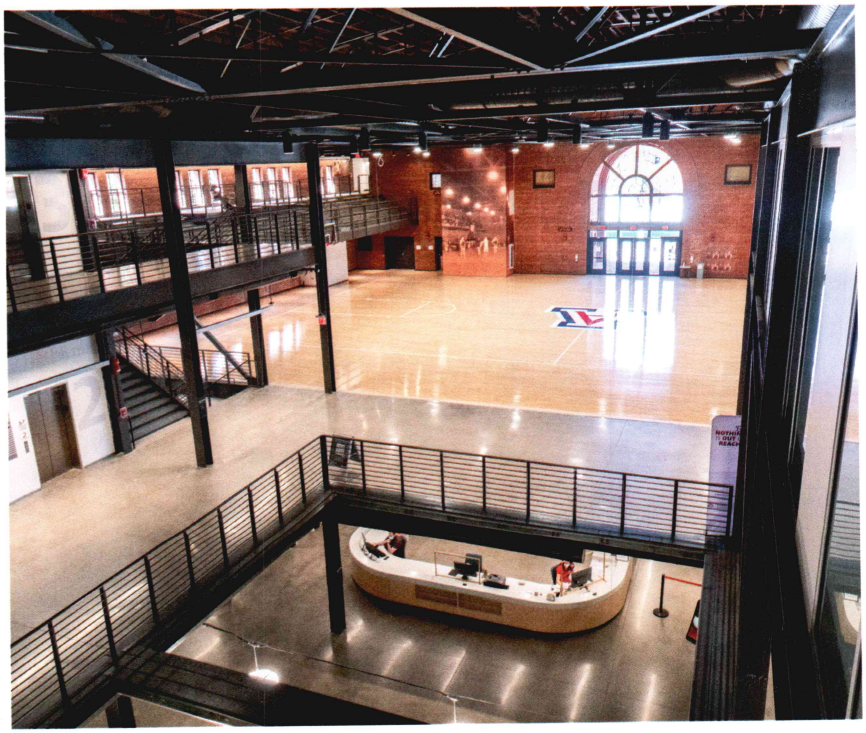
The district, the whole of which was co-designed by Poster Mirto McDonald with Miller-Hull and has received multiple awards including one from the American Institute of Architects, also includes interventions like new exits and openings on the western side of the Main Library and the eastern alley of the Science and Engineering Library, framed by a previously blank brick wall that Poster called "the ugliest single space on the university campus."

Jessica Bassi '20 '23, the U of A's historic preservation coordinator, says the tension between progress and tradition is what makes preservation complex. "Not every older building can — or should — be preserved," she says. "What matters is evaluating a building's historical significance alongside its functionality. If the university determines that constructing a new facility would better support its mission than preserving an existing one, that's a reasonable and justifiable decision."

Bassi happens to also be the university's real estate manager. "I wanted to be able to bring a knowledge of real estate and development — responsible real estate development — and the historic fabric of the university together," she says. "[Campus] is the perfect living laboratory for that."

It's a useful metaphor, the living laboratory. Poster describes the difference between preservation, restoration and rehabilitation like this: Preservation is essentially highly sensitive maintenance work, fixing what needs to be fixed and keeping things pristine. Restoration is taking an altered building back to what it once was, as Poster and his colleagues did with the train depot in downtown Tucson. Rehabilitation, which is also called adaptive reuse, means respecting the exterior of a building while adapting its interior to modern use — giving an old structure a previously unimaginable new life.

Bear Down isn't what it was — that's as true for alums who lived through the ugly ductwork era as it is for those who caught the last men's basketball game there back in early 1973, or the members of the shooting team who once practiced on the rifle range in the basement, or the students who swam in the pool out back. (That space is now a beautiful court between Bear Down and Bartlett.) It can be easy to forget that something so solid (the brick, the steel) is ultimately temporary, and strange to realize that it's our feelings about those temporary, changing places that hold up longest. ❖



LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

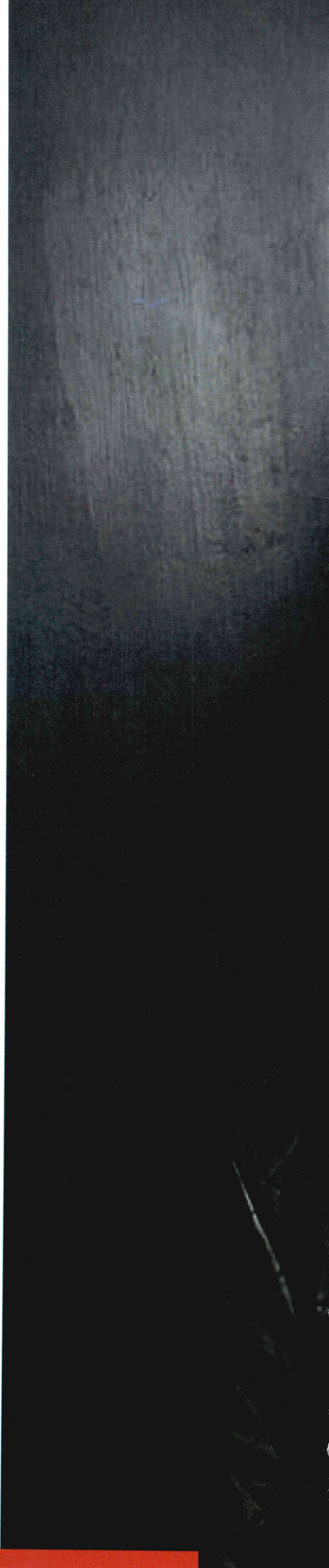
Whether she's landing big roles in Los Angeles or setting up her own scholarship, Vinessa Vidotto has come a long way since playing make-believe in the desert.

STORY BY: **TEDDY CAROLAN** | PHOTO: **PROVIDED BY VIDOTTO**

Acting professionally wasn't always an obvious fit for Vinessa Vidotto '18. The margins of her childhood were as vast as they were quiet: Albuquerque first, then Tucson. Desert landscapes, in other words, where the imagination had room to wander. She recalls this time as one spent unplugged from the world, with little exposure to pop culture besides a few movies on VHS lying around. "We lived somewhat under a rock. We didn't have cable or anything like that. I spent a lot of my time outdoors, playing make-believe." From there, the creativity only grew. With some money she'd saved, she bought a tripod and a budget Canon video camera from Costco. This was the mid 2000s, the advent of YouTube — out of that small investment inevitably came home videos, the kind of raw, slice-of-life content that preceded the hypercurated and self-conscious social media of today. She would continue making videos all the way into high school. "Instead of essays," Vidotto says, "I would ask my teachers, 'Can I make a video instead?'"

As Vidotto's interest in film and acting grew, so did the need to keep it under wraps. "Art as a way of life was never on the table in my family." Her father, a Vietnam War veteran drafted at 18 to fix airplanes, and her Vietnamese mother, working as a nail technician, raised their children with strict expectations: good grades and pragmatic career choices. So when a close friend suggested she take a drama class during her junior year of high school, Vidotto did something that would soon become a pattern: She orchestrated a clever way around the obstacle. "I quietly changed one of my electives," she says. "I was supposed to be taking engineering design, which is what my parents wanted. My mom saw my schedule and said, 'What is this?' I lied. I said they put it in there and I couldn't change it."

Before long, she was getting her sister to drive her in secret to an audition at the U of A for the acting program in the School of Theater, Film & Television. The program was highly competitive — only 14 spots for over 200 applications. Months passed with no word. Vidotto began



to panic, imagining her parents' reaction to having a daughter attending college as "undecided."

Eventually, she did hear back — an acceptance letter that brought her to tears on her sofa at home. The euphoria, as cathartic as it was, was quickly tempered by a familiar pressure: money. Like many first-generation college students, Vidotto had no obvious roadmap for funding a degree and no financial cushion at home to fall back on. Instead, she relied on a patchwork of scholarships, grants and her own savings, cobbled together with the kind of resourcefulness that had already begun to feel instinctive. Once enrolled, she worked overnight shifts at the front desk of Coronado dorm. "I'd work from midnight to eight in the morning and head to rehearsals the same day. I even ended up getting the shingles, which young people can get with enough stress going on." It is a time in her life Vidotto laughs about now, but she resists the temptation to romanticize it. "Sure, I had to work hard. But I don't want to be a pity story. I don't think suffering always has to be a part of it."

While practical about her own challenges, Vidotto meets those of others with compassion. In high school, she helped fellow students (many of whom were older than her) apply to college and complete scholarship applications and FAFSA forms, as well as offering general counsel. "A lot of people didn't know how to apply to colleges, let alone scholarships." Even then, she saw how a lack of support or options could limit possibilities. "I remember there was always a booth for joining the military. I could see that for

a lot of the boys, that was going to be the way, because it would secure them housing and easy money. But nobody really asked them, 'Who do you want to be? What do you want to do?'"

Long before her first acting gig, Vidotto was considering how she could help pave the way for the kinds of people she grew up with. In her freshman acting class at the U of A, students wrote and performed a personal monologue. In hers, she made a promise: "I said, in five years I want to create a scholarship." Vidotto knew at the time this was a tall order, something most people did later in life. She kept her head down, though, focusing on the one variable she could control at that time: acting. Rehearsals, auditions, minor technical exercises — Vidotto poured herself into all of it until, in her final year, the work paid off. At her senior showcase, she was signed by a manager on the spot — the first student in a decade to be picked up that way. "Lightning in a bottle," her professor, Hank Stratton, called it. What followed, Vidotto describes as a bit of a blur: Within months of moving to Los Angeles, she booked a recurring role on "Lucifer." Bigger roles soon followed, including a four-year run on "FBI: International" that took her around the world.

Amid success, she held onto the memory of that monologue. In 2024, Vidotto established an endowed scholarship at the U of A School of Theatre, Film & Television. The Vinessa Vidotto Scholarship in Acting awards $12,000 annually, supporting three students each year pursuing dreams like the ones she once chased. The scholarship also comes with a question recipients must answer in the form of a personal essay: What is your biggest fear? While it poses as a simple question, Vidotto hopes it will provide an opportunity for introspection to those who have gone a long time glossing over or avoiding it.

"It's not something to impress me," she explains. "It's more for them. I want this student, for a moment in their life, to properly sit down and pause to think about themselves." A fear Vidotto admits having in college was not feeling good enough. "I felt like the underdog. When I came to college,

Students perform in the U of A School of School of Theatre, Film & Television senior showcase in 2026. Photos: Jordan Marie Lorsung

I was suddenly surrounded by young and talented people who knew directors' names. It was intimidating. All I knew was that I liked to play pretend." While she can look back at it now as just a case of imposter syndrome, Vidotto wonders what might have happened without the financial support she received. "When you are working so hard on a craft that won't guarantee you a career, the self-doubt can spiral out of control. The relief and reassurance I got from scholarships is what I want to give to other students."

Whether it is that brief spell of imposter syndrome or the initial fib about her class schedule, Vidotto's story is as much about

When I came to college, I was suddenly surrounded by young and talented people who knew directors' names. It was intimidating. All I knew was that I liked to play pretend.'

perseverance as it is talent. Now, through her scholarship, she's ensuring that the next student sitting in a dorm room, wondering if they're good enough, if they can afford to keep going, has one less reason to give up. That commitment to the next generation — after only just graduating herself — might be the most remarkable role she's taken on yet. Lightning in a bottle, indeed. ❖

Vidotto performing in a Streetcar Named Desire at the U of A in 2017. Photo: Ed Flores

FROM OMAHA TO INDY

STORY BY: **MITCH ZAK** | PHOTOS: **MIKE CHRISTY**

Arizona Athletics delivers a historic year.

Under the lights at Lucas Oil Stadium, Arizona returned to the national stage.

But it was about more than just one weekend.

From last year's College World Series in Omaha to this spring's Final Four in Indianapolis, the past year ranks as one of the most successful in the history of Arizona Athletics.

Across athletic programs, the U of A didn't just compete this past year; it set the pace. Last November, the U of A football and men's and women's basketball teams combined to win all 18 of their games in the month, including victories over nationally ranked opponents and decades-long rivals. It was a defining month that reflected something deeper than wins: a shared culture, a unified belief and an organization moving forward together.

That approach has been built within teams and carried across the department.

In men's basketball, head coach **Tommy Lloyd** has established one of the most successful and consistent programs in the country. In just five years, his teams have combined disciplined execution with a style of play that resonates beyond McKale Center — now McKale Center at ALKEME Arena — culminating in a Final Four run that energized Wildcat Nation and returned Arizona to the national stage.

CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TEAMS AND THE COMMUNITY

For forward Ivan Kharchenkov, that connection between team and community has been clear.

"You could feel the connections and the energy everywhere: around campus, around Tucson and around the country," Kharchenkov says. "It was great to be able to share the special season with Wildcat fans along the way and to truly be part of something bigger than ourselves."

In the summer of 2025, Arizona's baseball team made a dramatic late season run to earn a spot in the College World Series, reinforcing its long-standing tradition of success on the diamond. Under head coach Chip Hale '87, the program appreciates its history while taking a forward-looking approach.

"There's a standard here that goes back generations, and our responsibility is to uphold it while continuing to move the program forward," Hale says. "Our players understand what it means to wear Arizona across their chest, and they take pride in competing every day."

Similarly, Arizona football, under head coach Brent Brennan, embraced a "redline mentality" built on effort, execution and accountability. The Wildcats reclaimed the Territorial Cup and capped their nine-win season with a Holiday Bowl appearance.

"Our culture is built on accountability, high expectations and supporting our student-athletes in everything they're working to achieve," Brennan says. "We challenge them every day, but we also make sure they have the resources and support to succeed in the classroom, on the field and beyond."

Quarterback **Noah Fifita '25** described that mindset as foundational.

"Redline isn't just something we say — it is how we show up every day," Fifita says. "It's accountability, trusting the person next to you and playing for something bigger than yourself. We're a family, and that's what drives us and keeps us connected through everything we do."

In women's triathlon, head coach Wes Johnson continues to lead one of the nation's top programs, setting a national standard in an emerging NCAA sport by winning back-to-back national championships in the first three years of the program's existence.

For triathlete **Kelly Wetteland '26,** that standard is evident in daily preparation.

"There's a level of discipline and consistency at Arizona that pushes you," Wetteland says. "You're competing at a high level and part of a team that expects the best from each other."

Volleyball, led by head coach Rita Stubbs '94 '95, continues to build momentum, pairing competitive performance with a culture centered on connection and development.

As Stubbs has said, "We are building something that is bigger than volleyball. It's about people, family and representing Arizona the right way."

Men's tennis, under head coach Clancy Shields, continued the program's run of success, winning the 2026 Big 12 regular season championship and hosting NCAA Tournament matches in Tucson.

PREPARATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, COMMITMENT

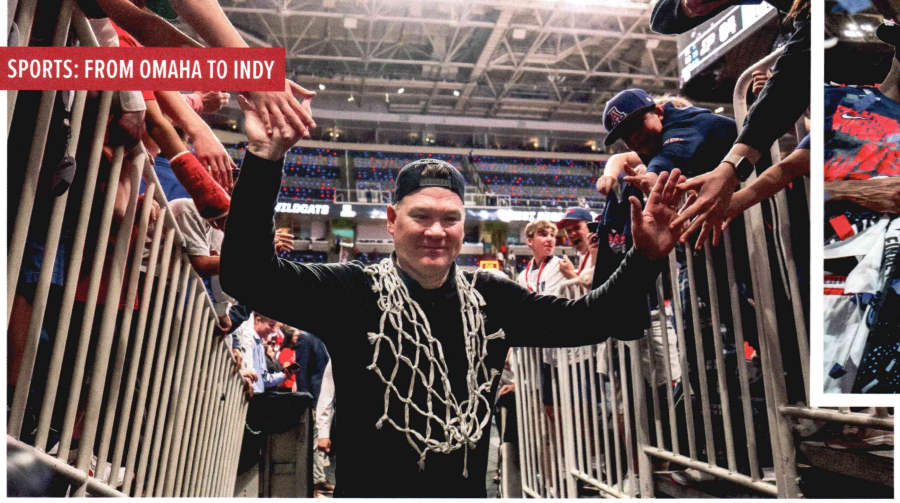
The throughline across all Arizona programs is clear: preparation, accountability and a commitment to something larger than any one individual or team.

That consistency reflects a deliberate approach to leadership.

Under the leadership of Desireé Reed-Francois '97 Arizona Athletics has been transformed into a 21st-century model for college athletics, integrating a deep commitment to student success with championship performance, operational discipline and the strategic use of innovative tools and partnerships. This success across competition, the classroom and the department's finances reflects the clarity of vision and execution she has brought to the program.

Photo: Marison Bilagody

"Our collective success reflects the extraordinary work of our coaches, assistant coaches and staff, who show up every day committed to supporting our student-athletes and helping them reach their full potential," says Reed-Francois. "Together, we have built a culture grounded in high expectations, strong support and a shared commitment to excellence in competition, the classroom and how we operate as a department. I'm incredibly proud of what this team has accomplished and the foundation we are continuing to build for the future."



FINANCIAL STABILITY

Arizona Athletics is operating from a position of strength, generating record levels of revenue through naming rights partnerships and philanthropic support that reflect the department's national visibility and market appeal. Recent agreements include a $60 million naming rights partnership for Casino Del Sol Stadium and a $27.7 million agreement establishing McKale Center at ALKEME Arena, together representing the largest publicly known sponsorships in each sport in Big 12 Conference history and a clear signal of Arizona's competitive standing in the national marketplace.

That momentum is matched by unprecedented philanthropic giving. Arizona Athletics has secured 10 seven-figure commitments, the most in a single year, contributing to what is projected to be the most successful fundraising year in department history, with more than $46 million in gifts and pledges. Together, these results underscore a program that is funded to compete at the highest level.

Equally important, Arizona Athletics is set to balance its budget this fiscal year, eliminating a $39 million deficit in fiscal year 2023. The alignment of competitive success with long-term financial sustainability positions the department to innovate and seize opportunities in a rapidly changing environment.

That strength extends beyond revenue and operations to what matters most: academic achievement and degree completion.

RECORD-SETTING GRADUATION RATES

Arizona's student-athletes continue to perform at a high level in the classroom, achieving a record 3.41 GPA across sports last fall, including 78% of student-athletes with a GPA of 3.00 or higher, 55% at 3.50 or higher and 25% with a perfect 4.00. This reflects a commitment to academic achievement and degree completion. The department's 92% graduation success rate was the highest in university history.

As President Suresh Garimella has emphasized, "When we invest in student-athletes, we are investing in their success in the classroom, in competition and in life beyond the university. Arizona Athletics reflects our commitment to excellence and opportunity, and to preparing students to graduate, lead and make a meaningful impact in their communities."

For Lloyd, that alignment is central to continued success.

"The University of Arizona and the City of Tucson are special, not just to me and my family, but for countless people across the state and the country," he says. "The sense of community and pride that we can bring to others is something we do not take for granted, because so many people pour their heart and soul into everything we do. And our coaches, student-athletes and staff will continue to work every day to uphold the standards that pave the way for success."

Taken together, these achievements reflect a program unified in purpose, grounded in accountability and built for sustained success.

Arizona is not just winning; it has built a foundation that will endure. ❖

Wildcat student-athletes celebrate during a 2026 commencement ceremony.

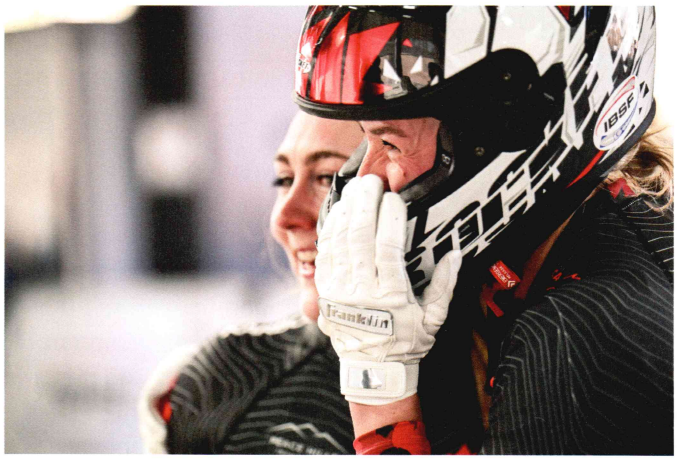


Photo provided by Skylar Sieben

OLYMPIC DREAMS

Double Wildcat Skylar Sieben represented Team Canada at the 2026 Winter Olympics.

STORY BY: **MCKENNA MANZO**
ACTION PHOTOS: **VIESTURS LACIS**

When **Skylar Sieben '22 '24** moved from Calgary, Alberta, to Tucson, it was for one reason: track and field. Recruited to compete for the University of Arizona, Sieben spent six years as one of the Wildcats' top multievent athletes, while earning a bachelor of science in biology and master of science in cellular and molecular medicine.

Sieben competed in the heptathlon for five years at Arizona, a track and field event that takes place over a two-day period. But even with a strong track resume, she always had a bigger dream — competing in the Olympics.

Representing Team Canada in the two-woman bobsled at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan, Italy, she ranked 11th across four runs.

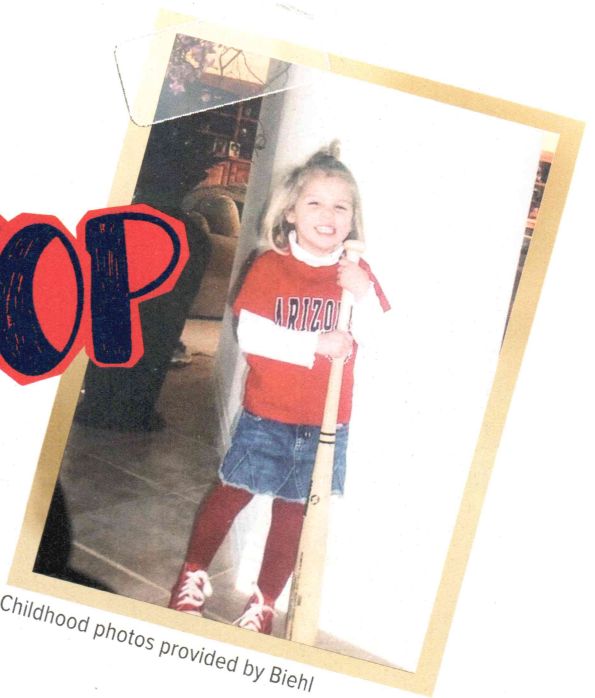
What makes Sieben's story surprising is how quickly it all happened: This is only her second season in bobsled. During her time at Arizona, U of A pole vault coach Dominic Johnson had encouraged her to try the sport. After finishing her master's degree, she decided to take the leap.

"A big misconception coming into the sport is, you don't realize how much behind the scenes work there is," she says. "It definitely threw me for a loop."

Tucson remains a major part of Sieben's life. While much of her family still lives in Canada, Sieben says she feels equally supported by the community she built in Southern Arizona.

"I feel like I have just as big of a community in Tucson as I do back home," she says. "And that's really cool." ❖

STEADY AT SHORTSTOP



Childhood photos provided by Biehl

Tayler Biehl grew up dreaming of playing for the Wildcats — then spent four years embodying what it means to wear the Block 'A.'

STORY BY: **SARAH KEZELE** | PHOTOS: **ARIZONA ATHLETICS**

For Tayler Biehl '26, wearing the Block "A" was always the plan.

As a child, Biehl watched her aunt, Jenae Leles, power Arizona softball to four consecutive Women's College World Series appearances from 2006 to 2009. Biehl remembers coming to Tucson from her home in Folsom, California, to watch games: the feeling of the face paint, the roar of the crowd, and being surrounded by family in the stands.

"I always wanted to be an Arizona Wildcat," Biehl says.

She even has photos of herself in the arms of Leles' teammates: Alicia Hollowell, Chelsie Mesa and Caitlin Lowe – now Biehl's head coach at Arizona.

Biehl's college softball career came to a close in May, when Arizona's season ended in the Durham Regional. Now, the standout shortstop and recent grad is reflecting on how four years in Tucson shaped her as a player and a person.

She arrived on campus in 2022 as part of Lowe's second recruiting class, a self-described "wide-eyed freshman" looking up to teammates Allie Skaggs and Carlie Scupin. She found playing time wherever she could, playing at six of nine positions in 2023 and even catching in the bullpen when needed.

"I was just trying to do whatever I could to be the best for my team," she says.

Lauren Lappin and Biehl

She didn't have to wait long for her breakthrough. In 2024, Biehl's sophomore season, she settled in as the starting shortstop. The game, she says, began to slow down as she became more confident in her reads, more fluid in her movements and less consumed by the idea of playing perfectly. She produced a .977 fielding percentage with 70 putouts and 103 assists that regular season and was voted the Pac-12 Co-Defensive Player of the Year.

Biehl says much of that improvement came from learning how to find the rhythm of the game rather than race through it. One of her coaches once compared her to an overeager golden retriever: "I was going a million miles a minute," Biehl says. "My legs were going one way and my body was going the other way."

Over time, she worked to become less choppy — both physically and mentally — trusting her preparation instead of trying to force every play.

"I can lean on my teammates, I can lean on my support system, and I can just have fun doing it and find the joy of not putting too much pressure on myself to have to be perfect, because this game is so opposite of perfect," she says.

That mindset carried into her senior year: On April 12, with Biehl at the heart of the Wildcats' infield, Arizona set a single-season program record with 46 double plays. The previous record was set in 1995.

The more Biehl grew into her game, the more she came to understand what it means to represent Arizona softball.

"Integrity is huge," Biehl says. "Playing the game the right way, taking care of your people, taking care of the alumni, taking care of your facilities."

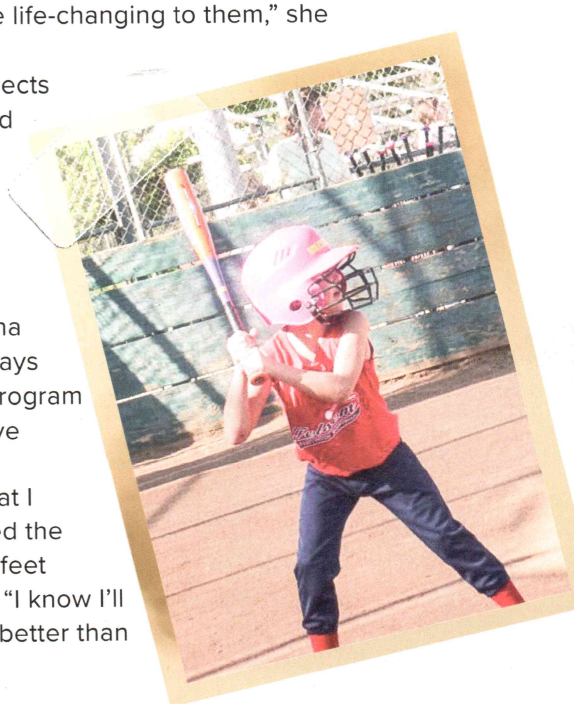
That perspective, she says, was shaped in large part by Lowe.

"She wants us to be the greatest humans we can be before we're the greatest athletes," Biehl says. "She's always cared about me as a human more than as an athlete, which I think is so special."

Biehl's people-first mindset now extends beyond softball. The recent grad plans to return to the Sacramento area for nursing school, with the goal of becoming a registered nurse and working in bedside care.

"I want to be able to be an advocate for those people who can't help themselves and support them in a way that interests me but also serve others in a way that will be life-changing to them," she says.

She also expects to stay connected to the sport by coaching alongside Leles at youth clinics back home.



For all Arizona gave her, Biehl says she leaves the program knowing she gave something back.

"I can say that I definitely watered the grass where my feet were," she says. "I know I'll leave this place better than I found it." ❖

CLASS NOTES

WILDCATS at the 98th Academy Awards

The University of Arizona made a strong showing at this year's Academy Awards, with alumni earning recognition across multiple categories.

"Frankenstein," coproduced by School of Theatre, Film & Television alum Scott Stuber '92, earned Oscars for Best Makeup and Hairstyling, Best Production Design and Best Costume Design, as well as several other nominations, including Best Picture.

Kristen Wiig, who attended the School of Art, reunited with the cast of "Bridesmaids" to present the awards for Best Original Score and Best Sound.

Jerry Bruckheimer '65, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology, produced "F1: The Movie," which took home the Oscar for Best Sound and was nominated for Best Picture.

Roy Judelson '87, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in media arts, and Steve Kerr '87, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in arts, co-executive produced "All the Empty Rooms," which memorialized children killed in school shootings through a look at the bedrooms they never returned to and took home the Oscar for Best Documentary Short.

1960s

Charles Boyer '62 recently served as guest conductor for the Waukesha Area Symphonic Band, the community concert band he founded and conducted at Carroll University in Wisconsin 50 years ago.

1970s

Anne Broyles '75 won the 2025 Oregon Book Award for Children's Literature for her picture book "I'm Gonna Paint: Ralph Fasanella, Artist of the People." Her 2025 book, "Eating to Save the Planet: How Veganism Helps Fight Climate Change," is a Junior Library Guild Gold selection.

Rhonda Hill '78 is a fashion industry analyst, curator and founder of EDGE, a fashion intelligence platform for emerging designers meeting certain standards of artistic, cultural and sustainable practice. EDGExpo.com serves as a resource for data and narratives about the clothing and textile industry. In 1998, Rhonda became the first Black vice president at Disney.

1980s

Ray Harris '82 retired from law and self-published "AI Judge: Intellectual Property Rights and Murder," the second book in his AI judge sci-fi trilogy. The book continues the hero's journey of the first AI robot judge applying Arizona law on a distant mining moon. Ray's first book, "AI Judge: Contracts and AI Rights," was published in 2024.

Lori Holdren '89 has been elected Northwest vice president of the executive board of the American Mathematical Association of Two-Year Colleges for the 2026-28 term, representing math educators throughout the Northwest. She earned her master's degree in mathematics at the U of A.

James McKnight '89 published the final book in a trilogy about his 12-year teaching career in Japan. "Life, Love & Baseball in Japan" is available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble in paperback, Kindle and audio formats.

1990s

John Gorey '93 joined Romanucci & Blandin, LLC, as partner. With more than 30 years of litigation experience, John is an active member of multiple bar associations, has served three terms on the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association Board of Managers and was appointed to the Illinois Supreme Court Character and Fitness Committee.

Christy Krieg '96 is the president of the Certification Board for Urologic Nurses & Associates, which recently transitioned to a remote proctored format, opening the exam to urology nurses worldwide. In 2025, she was inducted as a fellow of the Academy of Urologic Nurses and Associates. After two years as an operating room nurse at University Medical Center and 25 years in urology at Indiana University Health, she retired in

2025 to focus on her small farm and artisan jam business in central Indiana.

Alaina Levine '96 '97 published her latest book, "Create Your Unicorn Career: A Practical Guide to Designing the Authentic Career That Brings You Joy, Meaning, and Money – Even in Uncertain Times," drawing on her experiences as a U of A student and employee. Alaina is a TEDx speaker, career coach, science writer and author. She was honored as a certified speaking professional by the National Speakers Association in 2025.

Jeremy DeConcini '97 co-founded MotoSonora Brewing Co. in 2020 and serves as its chief executive officer.

Kyle Ethelbah '97 was appointed the associate vice president for institutional engagement and experience at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Kyle has more than 25 years of leadership experience in higher education.

John Utz '97 opened Ultimate Treatment Zone Physical Therapy in 2007. John fondly remembers his time in Dr. Betty Atwater's kinesiology class, held in the Ina E. Gittings building. He says his practice has been built on the principles he learned as a Wildcat.

2000s

Robert Rickelman '00 published his memoir, "Jumping to the End: A Lifetime Struggle with Mental Illness and Alcoholism" (Apprentice House Press). Robert earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish from the U of A.

Benjamin Matray '02 completed his probationary period as senior architect within the accessibility unit of the Architectural Codes and Policies Team for the California Division of the State Architect in Sacramento. He was delighted to discover he would be working alongside fellow Wildcat and senior architect **Kirklyn Cox '10,** proof, he says, that California Accessibility comes straight from North Olive Road.

Jennifer Herrera '05 was named executive director of PERIOD., a global youth-powered organization working to end period poverty and stigma. She previously served nearly six years as vice president of external affairs at the National Women's History Museum in Washington, D.C.

2010s

Daniel De La Cruz '13 was promoted to partner at Sheppard, where he is a member of the labor and employment practice group in the firm's downtown San Diego office. He represents employers in a variety of lawsuits and advises management teams.

Jade Nunes '15 was appointed to the Innovating Commerce Supporting Communities CenterBuild planning committee, which supports an annual premier conference for retail and real estate professionals. An active contributor to CenterBuild for several years, Jade has been named a CenterBuild Leaders Under 40 award recipient and has moderated panels and facilitated collaborative sessions for retail industry professionals.

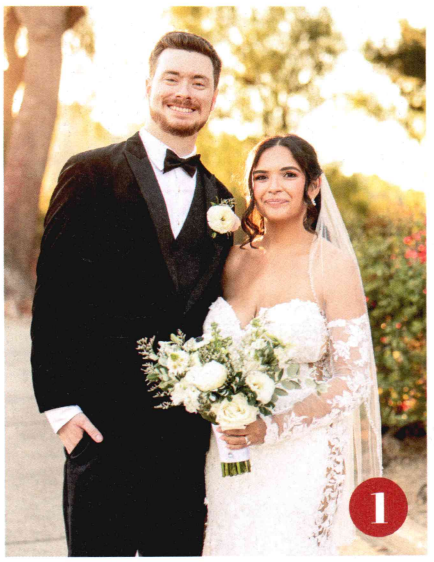
2020s

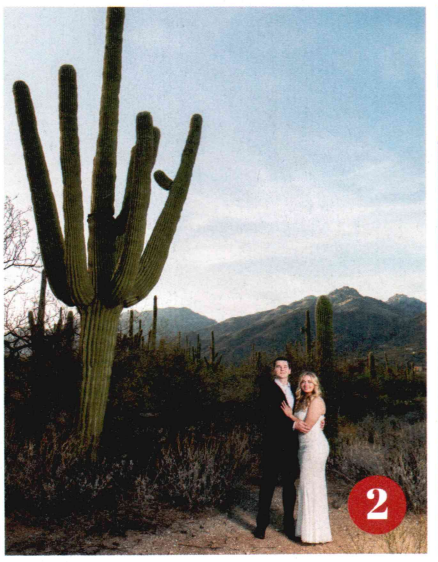
Kelly Esparza '20 is a semifinalist for the Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards in the fiction category for an excerpt from her latest adult speculative mystery novel. Kelly is a proud graduate with a double major in English and creative writing and a concentration in fiction.

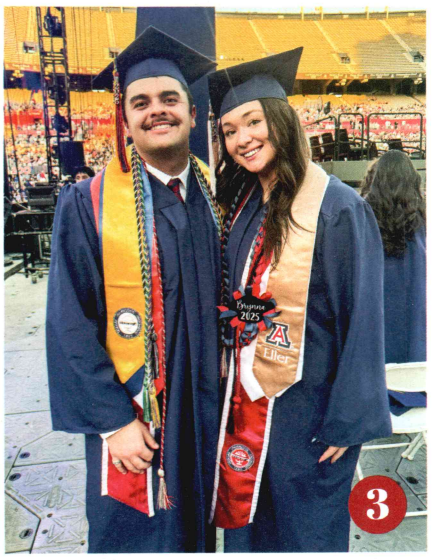
Jillian Ryan '24 recently started her podcast, "People Person Podcast," which dives into the multitudes of different New Yorkers. Jillian, who is based in New York City, hopes the podcast will leave the audience with a different outlook on life. You can find it on YouTube or follow @peopleperson.pod on Instagram and TikTok.

Mario Sosa '26 was selected as a recipient of the Arizona Latino Media Association journalism scholarship, honored at Univision Arizona. Mario, a bilingual journalist, completed his degree through his documentary, "Migration 0: Return Stories in Mexico City — A Documentary About the Stories That Begin Beyond the Border," which explores identity reconstruction among return migrants.

WEDDINGS AND FAMILIES







1. **Rebecca Anaya '20 and Evan Markovitz '19** met at the University of Arizona in 2017 and married this past November near their home in Fullerton, California, surrounded by loved ones, fellow Wildcats and their corgi, Pete — named after their favorite Tucson spot, Illegal Pete's. Evan is a ZonaZoo alum.

2. **Nicholas Tarquin '21** and Shelby Tarquin, a Tucson native, were married in Oro Valley May 9, 2025. They now live in Fort Worth, Texas, cheering on Wildcat football, basketball and softball from afar.

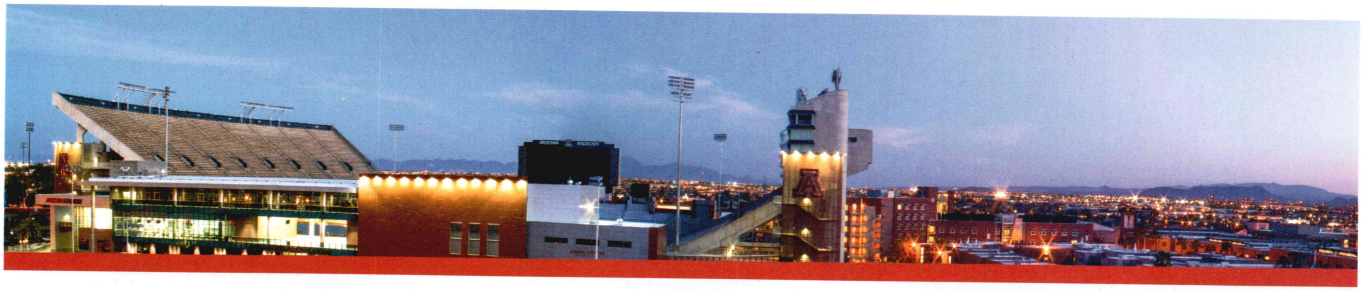
3. **Brynna Fisgus '25 and Matthew Mekari '25** met in their apartment parking garage after spending a year parking side by side. Their complex, Yugo, will always have a special place in their hearts.

University of Arizona Alumni of the Year Award recipients with President Suresh Garimella at the Feb. 13, 2026, ceremony honoring significant achievements in public service, education and volunteerism as well as a deep commitment to students, colleges and the university.

FAREWELL, DEAR FRIENDS

Honoring Wildcats who have passed away

Thomas Arana '51
Ida B. Byrd '51
Suzanne H. May '52
Donald L. Niewold '53
Susan C. Stuart '54
Henry L. Platt '55
Walter H. Clauss '56
Dawn B. Corley '56
John L. Collins '57 '58
Emojean K. Girard '57 '59
Robert L. Ammon '58 '59
Gordon E. Evans '58 '70
Edwin F. Nymeyer '58 '63
Lois S. Prange '58
Yvonne C. Donaldson '59
Mary B. Brock '60 '76
Arthur T. Flores '60 '66
John D. Lewis '60
Loma O. Allen '61
Reginald F. Bain '61
William A. Bennett '61
Eugene R. Parrill '62
Lewis A. Phelps '62 '63 '71
Clara B. Davis Cawthorne '63
Michael A. Curtis '63 '66
Ronald E. Davenport '63
Edgar J. Mccullough '63
Charles L. Townsdin '63 '66
Peter H. Erenfeld '64
John M. Gant '64
Janet H. Hearn '64 '69
Vernon L. Nicholas '64
Jill F. Shuger '64
Timothy J. Tegeler '64
Sigrid B. Brooks '65
Philip H. Cogan '65
Judy M. Herbolich '65 '85
Santiago J. Ibarra '65
Judy P. Schwartz '65
Bonnie C. Day '66 '72
John E. Frey '66
Charles N. Lavetter '66
George M. Lightner '66 '73
Donald N. Brown '67 '73
Olga H. Guerra '67 '72
Francis E. Krejci '67
Loyd H. Wilbur '67
John R. Baker '68
Herbert E. Nuttall '68 '71
George N. Ostrander '68
Timothy N. Root '68
Roderic F. Schmidt '68
Donald M. Steinwachs '68 '70
Lucy A. Willard '68 '74
James A. Borgeson '69
Edward Johnson '69
Alfred Altuna '70
Miguel Esparza '70
Margaret B. Foster '70
Terry W. Kirkpatrick '70
William K. Manos '70
Timothy M. Brown '71 '79
John P. Cherry '71
Thomas J. Evans '71
Anthony C. Giangreco '71
Walter F. Johnson '71
Lafon L. Phillips '71 '73 '92 '99
Emil R. Witzens '71
Robert Doucet '72
Onyria H. McElroy '72 '81
Bruce L. Nelson '72
Randolph S. Reynolds '72
Stephen D. Todd '72
Joseph L. Bidegain '73
Steven A. Cate '73
Daniel J. Conway '73
Richard N. Dodge '73
Karen H. Fritz '73
Raul A. Montano '73
Jeanie Porter '73
Kathryn K. Allen '74
Bernadette Komonchak '74
Robert B. Vielledent '74
Sue D. Reider '75
Carole D. Siegel '75
Helen R. Davis '76
Pamela H. Duncan '76
Marianne B. Fife '76 '77
Burr N. Carter '77
Davis H. Hartman '77
Jeff L. Derrick '79
John E. Drazkowski '79
Judy N. Margolis '79 '81
Scott M. Ruth '79
James R. Brooks '81
Jill H. Jones '81
Richard A. Kiser '81
Figueiredo Paulo '81
C. Eugene E. Settle '81 '93
Jerelyn S. Ballard '82
Phyllis A. Fitzgerald '82
Charles G. Brown '83
Sylvia R. Gengler '83
Irma E.G. Lopez '83
Peter E. Helander '84
James A. Mousigian '85
Elouise M. Rusk '85
Timothy F. Clesen '86
Alice L. Atchley '87
Roger W. Frazier '88
Trudy H. Iaccino '88
Richard A. Kujath '89
Lauren M. Pell '89
David A. Schluter '89
James R. Shelby '90
David M. Gillilan '92
Nathan T. Sawyer '92
Cynthia K. Gross '93
Marcus A. Kelley '95
Timothy P. Kornacki '95
Monica M. Leonard '95
Andrew M. Papanikolas '97
Michael B. Shimel '98
Nicole L. Olmstead '02
Larry C. Stewart '06
Phillip A. Witte '06 '24
Ross A. Helland '11



A WILDCAT'S LEGACY LIVES ON

Forty years after Richard Garcia's passing, alumni are honoring his lifelong commitment to leadership by strengthening the scholarship that bears his name.

Richard Garcia '82 embodied what it means to be Wildcat. Raised in Bisbee, Arizona, he came to the University of Arizona and quickly grasped campus life with both hands. While at the U of A, Garcia marched in the band, served as a resident assistant in Yavapai dorm, was a member of Bobcats Senior Honorary and became an active voice in ASUA student government — a commitment to his fellow students that carried him all the way to student body president his senior year. He also was awarded the Merrill P. Freeman Medal for outstanding male senior.

In May 1986, Garcia's life was tragically taken during a visit to Tucson. In remembrance, the Richard Garcia Memorial Scholarship Endowment was created. It awards two scholarships each year to full-time juniors who are active in campus life.

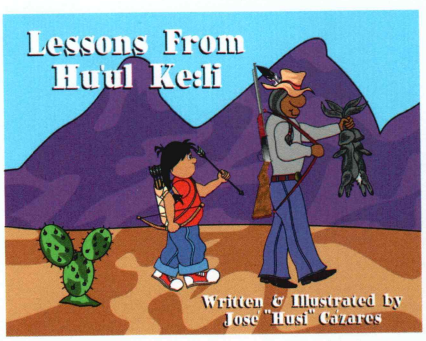
With this year marking the 40th anniversary of Garcia's death, Bobcats Senior Honorary alumni are looking to build on his legacy by expanding the scholarship endowment. Their goal is to grow the endowment from $68,000 to at least $100,000 — a milestone that will ensure meaningful, sustained support for decades to come. With your help, they will get there.

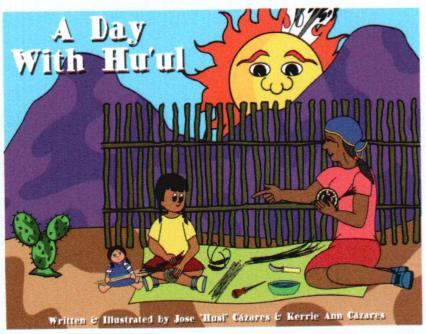
Already, two fellow Wildcats from the class of 1982 have established a matching pledge, meaning every dollar you donate (up to the first $20,000) will be doubled. Every gift, at any level, is an investment in students who lead, serve and make the U of A community better, just as Garcia did.

Give today at ***give.uafoundation.org/richardgarcia***

WILDCAT AUTHORS AT THE 2026 TUCSON FESTIVAL OF BOOKS

The University of Arizona campus is home to one of the largest book festivals in the United States. Since 2009, the Tucson Festival of Books has celebrated literature through panels, booksellers and family programming. This year's festival featured some incredible alumni authors.





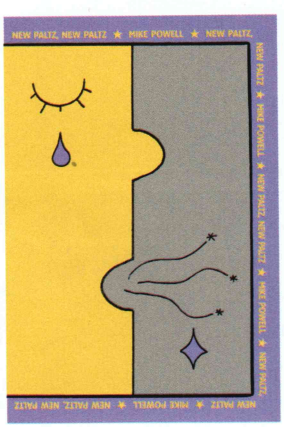
If you enjoy Children's literature, get to know **HUSI CÁZARES '04.** Cázares, an enrolled member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, is a trilingual speech-language pathologist and the author of multiple picture books about everyday life for Tohono O'odham children.

WILDCAT FACT: Cázares received the distinguished alumnus award from the Department of Speech, Language & Hearing Sciences!

LOGAN PHILLIPS

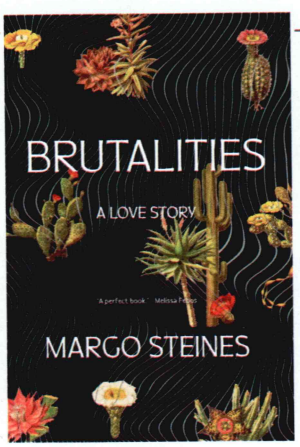
If you enjoy poetry, get to know **LOGAN PHILLIPS '21.** Phillips is an artist and the author of "Reckon," a book that combines memoir, poetry, newspaper clippings and photographs exploring his connection to his hometown of Tombstone.

WILDCAT FACT: Phillips is the 2026-29 Tucson Poet Laureate!



If you enjoy short novels, get to know **MIKE POWELL '12.** Powell's "New Paltz, New Paltz" is a short, comic novel about a magazine fact-checker stumbling through his '20s. It is his first published fiction.

WILDCAT FACT: Powell works at the U of A Foundation and Arizona Alumni Magazine!



If you enjoy essays, get to know **MARGO STEINES '21.** Steines is a writer and the author of the memoir in essays "Brutalities: A Love Story," which investigates the dynamics of violence, power and desire.

WILDCAT FACT: Steines has taught at the University of Arizona Writing Program!

DISHES WE LOVE

As the first UNESCO City of Gastronomy in the U.S., Tucson has no shortage of legendary restaurants. Earlier this year, we asked alumni on social media to share a dish that takes them back to their U of A days. Their answers did not disappoint.

WHAT DISH TAKES YOU BACK TO YOUR WILDCAT DAYS?

Join the conversation **@arizonaalumni** on Facebook and Instagram!

25
53
86
"I loved the banana pancakes from Bobo's and the yummy flour tortillas I used to make while working at Two Pesos in the early '90s!" - Tina Marie Bone '95
"Late night or early morning burritos from Nico's or Los Betos! That's my answer." - Chantelle Sliman '97
"I spent so much time at Old Chicago and Coffee Etc. Sad that they're both gone. But Bison Witches is still around and as good as ever. I always get the cream of broccoli in a bread bowl!" - Jennie James '02
"I always went to Greasy Tony's for a tuna sub. After graduation, I met my future husband, who had gone to Rutgers in New Jersey. It turned out there were only two Greasy Tony's locations in the country: Rutgers and the U of A. His favorite was also the tuna sub. It was meant to be!" - Barrie Brown '82
"There was a salad place at the Student Union that had gummy bears as an optional topping. I tried it once on a dare. It wasn't good. But it's the first thing I think of when someone asks about food at the U of A." - Demi Funk '11

AISLE 1200
Research, Innovation & Impact
PEGMATITE MINERALS
Of the Arizona Mining, Mineral and Natural Resources Education Museum Collection

PIT BOSS

Les Presmyk draws on a lifetime underground to shape the mining industry.

STORY BY: **TEDDY CAROLAN** | PHOTO: **CATIE SANDOVA**

Les Presmyk '75 was a junior in high school when he set his sights on mining engineering — and on the University of Arizona as the place to pursue it.

The choice proved prescient. While other programs were struggling, Presmyk recalls the U of A's program in Mining and Geological Engineering continued to graduate 10 to 15 engineers every year. "Meanwhile some programs had dwindled to as few as two students," he says. "Several were on the verge of shutting down altogether."

Presmyk enrolled in the College of Mines Work Co-op Program, beginning work the day after he graduated from high school. He traded the classroom for the field — or, more precisely, for what lay beneath it. By the time he graduated from the U of A, he'd spent almost two and a half years with Miami Copper Company, gaining hands-on experience in mines, mills, assay labs and engineering departments across the company.

The decades that followed saw Presmyk rise through the ranks at Magma Copper Company. "The classroom provided the basis for all of the engineering disciplines: mechanical, civil and mining," he says. "Nothing beats practical experience, however. At Magma Copper, I immersed myself in the day-to-day production at a mine." That drive paid off: Within a few years, Presmyk had climbed from front-line production supervisor to the youngest assistant general mine foreman in the company's history. Success then opened the door to a pivotal role at the Salt River Project, where he took on big-picture responsibilities, managing coal supply contracts and mine planning, capital and reclamation budgets on behalf of the co-owners of five coal-fired generating stations across Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado.

In September 2025, Presmyk was selected as the 14th State Mine Inspector for Arizona — a position established in 1912 and the only one like it in the U.S. Within his office are deputy inspectors, trainers and abandoned mine specialists, all of whom bring years of field experience in keeping Arizona mine workers safe. "Safety is a nonpartisan issue. More than anything, we see ourselves as educators," Presmyk says, "an extra set of eyes to catch those unsafe conditions that can be overlooked on a daily basis."

With over 600 working mines and an estimated 100,000 abandoned mines in Arizona, the demand for these people isn't going anywhere. To the U of A students of today, Presmyk's message is simple: The mining industry needs them — engineers, environmental scientists, computer technicians, public policy experts. "Mining today is very different than it was even when I graduated in 1975," he says. "The opportunities have never been greater or more diverse." ❖

Watch video with Presmyk at the 48th Annual International Collegiate Mining Competition at the U of A San Xavier Underground Mining Laboratory.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YkheoDi1jo

Aguilar received the U of A's Alumni Achievement Award at Commencement in May. Photo: Chris Richards

A 'FORREST GUMP' LIFE

Alumni Achievement Award winner Cisco Aguilar, Nevada's secretary of state, embraces a path of deep purpose — and surprise.

STORY BY: **MATTHEW MORRIS**

Ask **Cisco Aguilar '00 '04** to name his political hero, and he points to his grandfather, Frank Verdugo, who gave his life fighting for the rights of Latino miners in the Arizona towns of Hayden and Winkelman. A union leader, Verdugo became a local hero after his vehicle plunged from a bridge following a negotiation.

"He died for what he believed," Aguilar says. "And he fought for what he believed."

In 2023, Aguilar — a graduate of Tucson's University High School who earned bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration and a juris doctor from the University of Arizona — became Nevada's secretary of state. The state's first Latino to hold the office, Aguilar has lived in Nevada since 2004.

He likens his unexpected career path to Forrest Gump's famous line: "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get." Aguilar has worked alongside tennis legends Stefanie Graf and Andre Agassi as general counsel for their management company and foundation, chaired the Nevada Athletic Commission, and spent a year in Germany with Adidas through a Robert Bosch Foundation fellowship.

Central to Aguilar's work is the idea of "community rent" — the responsibility to give back. He spent 18 years on the board of Tucson's Marshall Foundation and has focused much of his service on expanding educational opportunity, including helping found Las Vegas' Cristo Rey St. Viator College Preparatory High School, where most students are Latino.

Aguilar says Nevada owes much to Latino workers, whose voices he works to elevate. Wherever his journey leads next, he carries a lesson learned in Tucson: "When things are tough, it's time to Bear Down." ❖

WITH AN ACCENT ON THE "A"

By Andrea Hernández

PHOTOS: **PROVIDED BY HERNÁNDEZ**

University of Arizona junior Andrea Hernández grew up in Nogales, Sonora, where she attended a nursing-intensive high school before transferring to school in Rio Rico, Arizona. Here, she reflects on her passion for science, her dual citizenship and how it felt to split her education across the border.

This essay was originally produced during Andrea's freshman year in Associate Professor of Practice Melani Martinez's Borderlands Writing course, which encouraged students of all backgrounds growing up in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands to write about the geographic and familial circumstances that shaped their lives. Hernández later updated it to reflect her personal and academic journey at the U of A. We have included the assignment prompts that inspired Hernández's writing.

Fig. 1. Papelito #3: Write about where you come from — the specific places that help shape your identity. You might name regions, cities, neighborhoods, or even map coordinates.

I lived most of my life in Nogales, Sonora — the city of *el mono bichi.* Nogales saw me grow and helped me become who I am today. My happiest memories and places are treasured there.

One of the most remarkable experiences I had in Nogales was at the first high school I attended, Escuela de Enfermería Pablo de Anda, one of the strictest and most challenging nursing schools in Sonora. Anatomy, physiology, fundamentals of nursing, public health and microbiology were some of my classes. For someone driven by a love for science, this was exciting.

At 15, I learned how to inject medication, apply intravenous lines, take vital signs, get blood samples and navigate the hierarchies and organizational structure of a hospital. The more I learned, the more I loved the field, especially biomedical research. Consequently, I started considering research as a possible career path. When sharing this new passion with my parents, they showed genuine support, but concern at the same time. They saw something I did not.

Doing research in Mexico is not an impossible path but definitely a tough one due to the lack of support, technological development and opportunities for medical researchers.

I am a dual citizen of Mexico and the United States. My family decided that the best way for my sisters and me to realize our goals was to exercise that citizenship. I was happy at Pablo de Anda, so excited and curious, but my parents insisted.

I knew that by changing to an American school, I would have more opportunities to develop my career, but my heart yelled at me to stay. I remember asking myself if it was worth sacrificing my current happiness and peace to fulfill a dream. My answer was no, but still, I transferred to Rio Rico High School. And wow, it was a sacrifice. I missed hearing my classmates' jokes and wearing that white nursing uniform.

My parents and those close to me could not understand why it was so hard for me to leave Pablo de Anda if I did not want to be a nurse but a researcher. They did not see that I fell in love with the skills and knowledge I was obtaining, and that those skills would help me nourish my love for science regardless of whether I became a nurse. Also, I was a semester away from being able to exercise my skills in a hospital, a real setting, with real patients — what in Mexico we call "practices" and in the States we might call "rotations." By leaving Pablo de Anda, I was leaving this excitement and opportunity behind. All to move to a place whose syllabus was not of my interest?

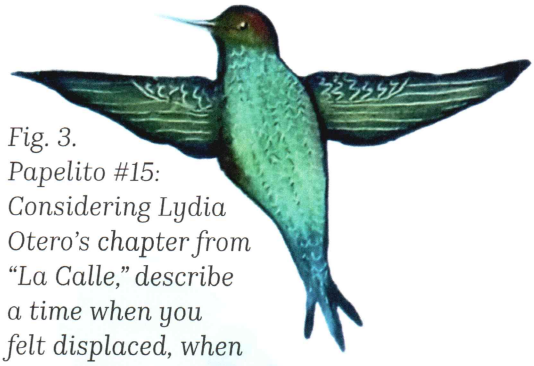
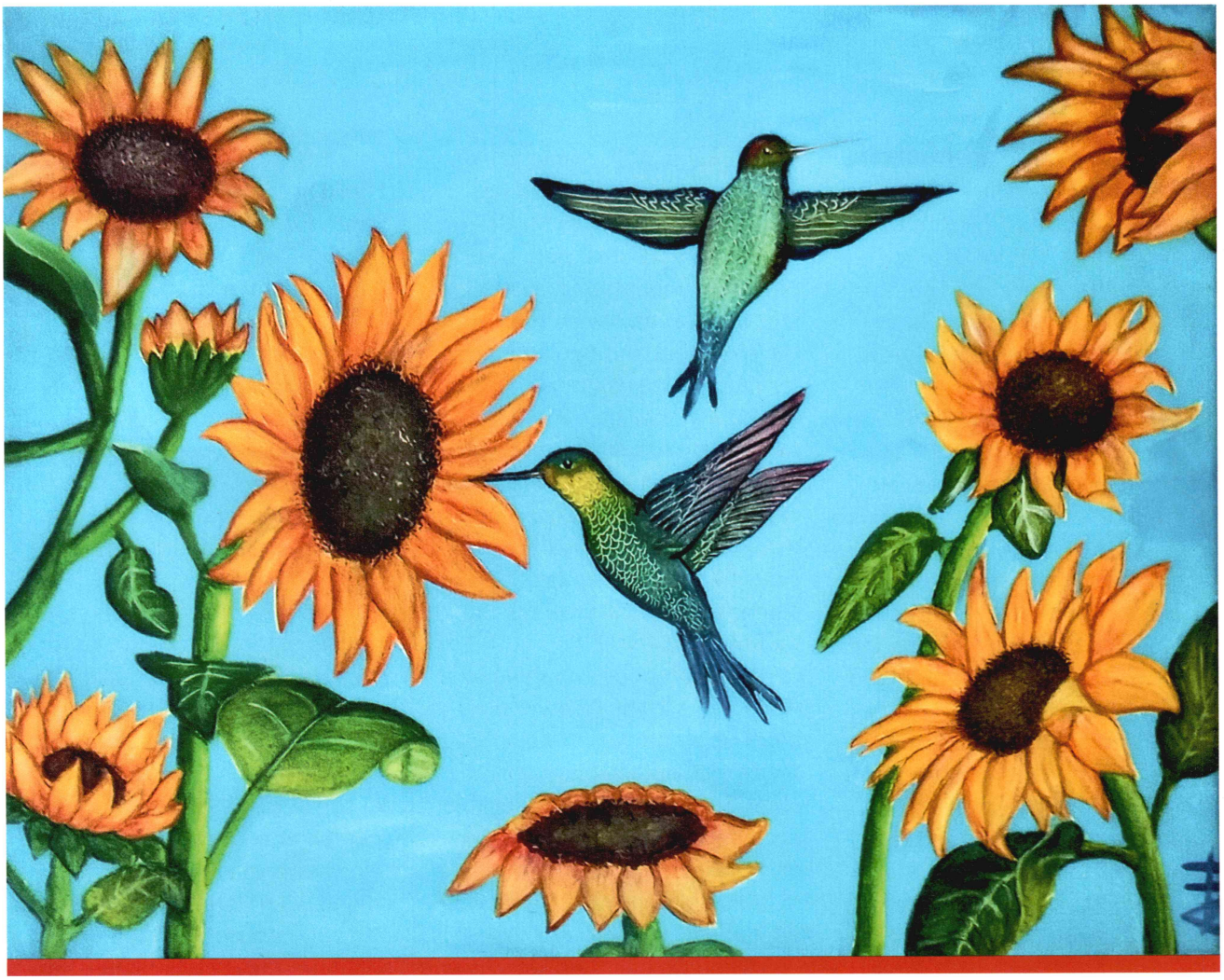


Fig. 3. Papelito #15: Considering Lydia Otero's chapter from "La Calle," describe a time when you felt displaced, when you might have felt kicked out, bulldozed, or removed from a place you love. Why was it unjust, and what do you think needs to be remembered about that place?

The memories of my first months at Rio Rico High School are scarce. I remember silently crying at my desk, all day, every single day. At that time, that uncontrolled weeping made no sense to me. Shouldn't I be grateful to be here?

The weeping turned into shivers, then into insomnia, then into zero motivation, then into self-harm thoughts and then into actions. My school transition was the *gota que derramó el vaso* — the drop that made the glass overflow — that revealed that I was carrying more than anger for changing schools. I was carrying trauma and repressed emotions from my past that needed a small push to purge them out and begin to heal. I felt as if I did not belong to the system I was in, that I was taking the place of someone else. On top of that, I was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome, making everything vastly more challenging. I decided to look for professional help. And just like that, I initiated a two-year therapeutic process that changed my perception completely.

Something I learned during this process is that healing has many faces. Some days it looks like a one-hour session with a therapist, other days it looks like



Andrea Hernández, "Flowery Flutter" (2023), acrylic on canvas

I, being a naive second-grade girl, used to tell my mom, "Mami, someday they'll mention my name in the efemérides saying I discovered the cure for cancer."'

being on track with your medications, while other times it looks like a cold night full of desperate and uncontrolled weeping trying to be comforted by the warmth of an old gas heater and your father's arms, a father who tearfully whispers in your ear, "Forgive me for not knowing how to help you." In my case, healing was a process that involved making the entire household vulnerable. It was an invitation to metacognition, at a family and individual level, to collaboratively get out of this tunnel that I had been lost in for years.

Fig. 2. Papelito #19: Think of the last time you heard or watched someone's testimony or testimonio. What did you think or feel after you heard it?

So I stand strong and upright, saying my name with pride. My name is Andrea Hernández, with an accent on the "a." I am a junior at the University of Arizona, double majoring in biochemistry and molecular and cellular biology. My curiosity for understanding how our bodies fight diseases has guided me through a research journey in protein biochemistry, drug discovery and immunobiology, shaping my goal of developing next-generation vaccines. This summer, I will continue my research training in immunology as an Amgen Scholar at Yale University and prepare to apply for Ph.D. programs.

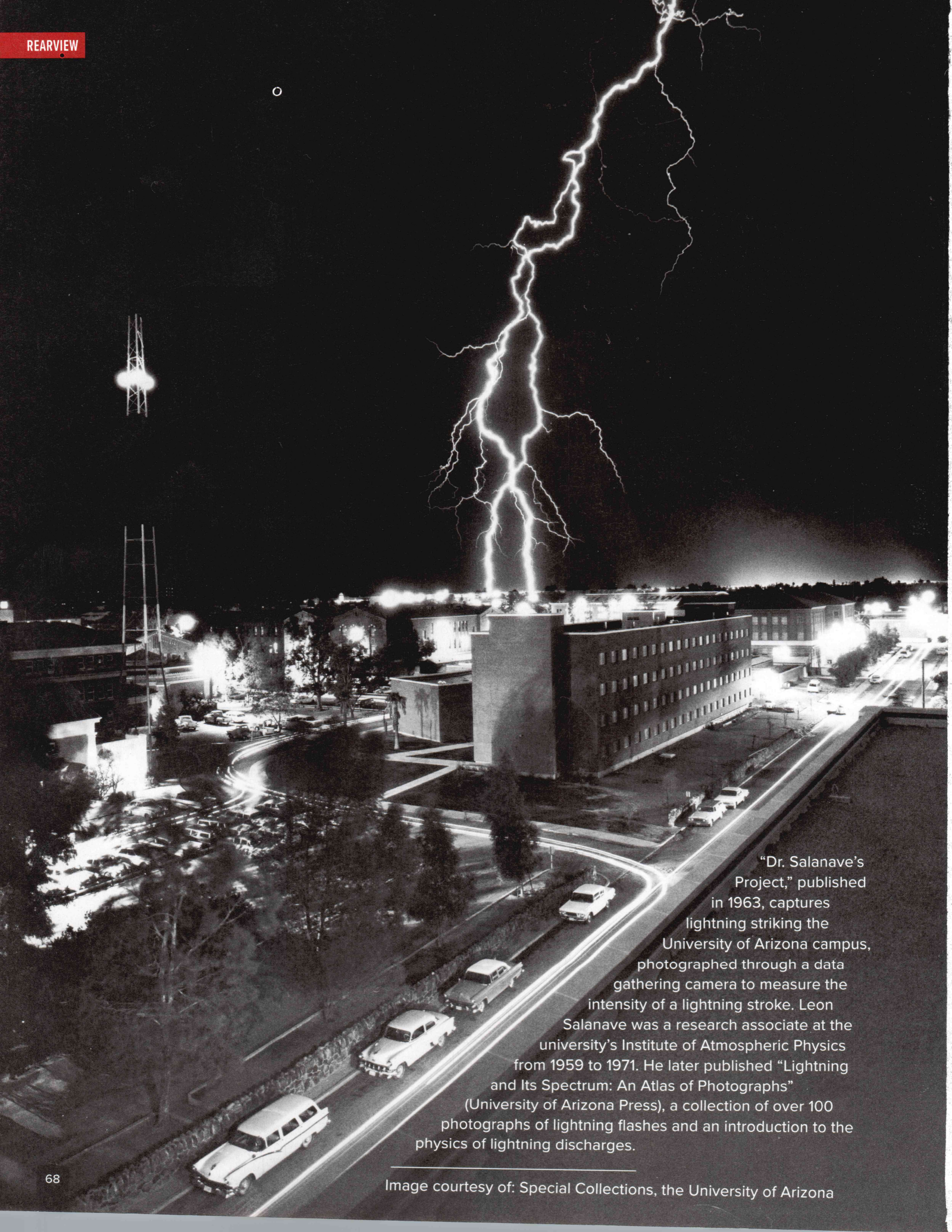
Statistically and historically, someone like me — a first-generation Latina student, a Mexican immigrant in the United States — would not be in college doing research at this level, but little by little, we have shown the world that there is room for everyone and that we are all capable and should be given the opportunity to pursue an education. Education is not only a privilege but also a responsibility, a responsibility to lead the way for those who come after us and honor the sacrifice of those who could not or were not allowed to pursue their passion.

I did not listen to the voices in my head that told me I was not capable of accomplishing my dream, nor to the comments of people who said that being an immigrant — my *cara de nopal,* my "nopal face," a way of marking me as visibly and unmistakably Mexican — was synonymous with delinquency. I learned to be proud of my accent and my last name. I adapted to a culture that once felt foreign, redefining my identity and healing from a past I did not yet understand. I recovered the spark I lost the day I left Pablo de Anda, proving that nopales grow *donde se les da la gana* — anywhere, against anything, even where they are not expected to survive.

Every Monday throughout grades K-12 in Mexico, a civic ceremony known as *los honores* ("the honors") is performed. In this ceremony, the entire school gathers in the courtyard to celebrate and commemorate the national flag, share historical facts from that particular week (known as *efemérides*), and go over important announcements from the school. I, being a naive second-grade girl, used to tell my mom, "Mami, someday they'll mention my name in the *efemérides* saying I discovered the cure for cancer."

Almost 12 years later, I was a student of the Diversity in Cancer Research Internship at the University of Arizona, a program funded by the American Cancer Society. I was preparing doses of a promising leukemia drug my lab invented to test their effectiveness when I paused, set the pipette down and looked around. I was standing in a professional research laboratory, working on a project that could offer hope to patients with blood cancers. This is when I remembered what I used to tell my mom, and inevitably, my eyes started to fill up with tears. My body was invaded by immense joy.

The younger Andrea would have been astonished to see that we were living her dream and pursuing the opportunity to contribute to the scientific community, using that creativity that always characterized us to create appealing scientific posters to display at national conferences where experts in the field recognize and admire the work we do. It is in these moments I realize that the hardship we went through and the hard work we have put in are paying off. This is for my family, *nuestra gente* and humanity. ❖



"Dr. Salanave's Project," published in 1963, captures lightning striking the University of Arizona campus, photographed through a data gathering camera to measure the intensity of a lightning stroke. Leon Salanave was a research associate at the university's Institute of Atmospheric Physics from 1959 to 1971. He later published "Lightning and Its Spectrum: An Atlas of Photographs" (University of Arizona Press), a collection of over 100 photographs of lightning flashes and an introduction to the physics of lightning discharges.

Image courtesy of: Special Collections, the University of Arizona

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